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Highway 83 Revisited: Small Towns Rerouted by School Reform

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HIGHWAY 83 REVISITED: SMALL TOWNS REROUTED BY SCHOOL REFORM

by

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BY SCHOOL REFORM

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Highway 83 Revisited is an examination of how small town citizens relate to their local schools and to what extent a local school matters to the vitality of a community. To serve as a case study, I focus on the town of Pemberton, Minnesota and its school. Pemberton was founded in 1907 a railroad stop south east of Mankato and today has a population of 247. Pemberton's school began with planning by town's residents in the early twentieth century, and in subsequent decades the school district went through two consolidations, and ended in 1995 with the school's closing. I place the school and community in the context of national, state, and local education policies that had unintended consequences which in turn reshaped the town and eventually helped to ensure the closure of its school. I show that educational polices affect all schools and not simply an intended target such as the case of desegregation of urban schools. Beyond national desegregation laws and federal court rulings other policy changes include local and state funding mechanisms and open enrollment policies. Minnesota's open enrollment policy, which became mandatory for all public school districts to abide by in 1989, allowed students to enroll in another public school district without seeking approval from the school district in which they resided. The open enrollment policy created an environment of completion where school districts contend for each student and the subsequent state funds based on the number of students enrolled. The result of such competition produced school districts who did well and others that were hurt. I inspect social pressures upon a community as rural America shifts from small family farms to large farms with many one-time farmers moving to urban centers. I chronicle the school board's decisions to consolidate Pemberton's school district with other communities and the subsequent affects to the life of the town. I address the consequences for Pemberton lacking the school as a community hub for more than a decade as the

school building. Lastly, I provide a history of how Pemberton reclaimed the school building and began the struggle of restructuring a community identity while lacking a public school.

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FOREWORD

In 1957 the town of Pemberton turned fifty years old. It had a population of 152 and a basketball team of ten. The Pemberton Tigers' facilities included a new gymnasium built in 1954 which helped lure opponent to town. According to the team's coach, Harvey Johnson, "But if they [the Pemberton community] hadn't built the gym, I wouldn't have been able to build the team".[1] The community's investment paid off as crowds were drawn from the region.

The 1957 team advanced to the Minnesota State Boys Basketball Tournament. Prior to categorization of schools based on size. In 1957 all schools competed for one state championship. With a victory over St. James, Pemberton advanced as one of the final eight teams to the state tournament. It was, and remains, the smallest town in Minnesota history to send a team to the boys' basketball tournament. Sid Hartman reported that only a handful remained in the city of Pemberton on the day of the game, because most had taken the journey to watch their boys play. Unfortunately for the Tigers they lost their first game 70-65 to Walnut Grove and a later consolation game to Rochester 66-65. Nevertheless, the

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[1] Dan Nienaber, "Hoops Big in Pemberton's History," *The Free Press*, Mankato, MN, February 10, 2014, http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/x519271984/Hoops-big-in-Pembertons-history/print.

memory of this team remains engraved in the minds of those who experienced the thrill and it has become a part of the collective memory of the town as this bit of history retold to each new generation. In 2007, the town gathered to remember the 1957 team and celebrate the town's centennial.

As a child growing up in Pemberton, I recall my frequent encounters with the ghosts of 1957. What seemed ghosts to a small boy were actually black and white figures in an extremely large picture of the 1957 boys' basketball team prominently hanging in their school's main hallway. The picture featured young men looking pale and scrawny, with four of them holding basketballs each painted with the year. I sensed that I was mystically and historically connected to their greatness even though I could not dribble or shoot.

Upon first glance at these shadowy figures in the picture, two important facts may not be immediately evident. The first is that there are only ten players. Then, as today, teams can have twelve players on the roster. Yet the school only provided ten uniforms. Thus from the opening tip of every game the Tigers were under-manned. The other feature is that this was a team of brothers. Three of the ten were the sons of Lyle and Orvilla Owen and a fourth was their cousin. These ten boys grew up together and were never pressured to play for another team as open enrollment and its trappings were decades away. According to Coach Johnson, "his team played so well because those guys had been playing together for years, shooting baskets

outside their homes well into the winter months".[2] These were Pemberton kids, playing on Pemberton's team, and representing the Pemberton community.

My memories in Pemberton, Minnesota focus around two objects that both separated people and brought them together on a daily basis: Highway 83 and our school. Highway 83, simply "83" to the locals, is a black ribbon of hard tar that cuts from the tree-filled Minnesota River valley onto the tabletop flat of the Western prairie. Pemberton school was the center of my world and it is safe to say no other place has done more than to shape the town's social identity and collective memory.

Highway 83 is twenty four miles long and until 1955 was a dirt road running southeast out of Mankato towards Albert Lea. It served as the direct link to the outside world for Pembertonians. Pemberton's population today is 247 - its highest ever. The town covers nearly one- fifth of a square mile. Roads always function with a simultaneous dual purpose. On the one hand, roads and highways offer the possibility of taking one away from a place that he/she would rather not be and on the other hand delivering that person to somewhere he/she wants to go. Yet, today, like an old friend, 83 no longer holds the promise of excitement beckoning me to leave; rather, it welcomes me to the town of my youth and to the place where social forces molded my world view. As southbound traffic on 83 slows from 55mph to 45mph, I turn off with the Hunting Elevator to my left and the Motor Mart to my right and I return to my hometown.

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[2] Dan Nienaber. "Hoops Big in Pemberton History."

Highway 83 provided easy travel for the majority of Pemberton's workforce. Pemberton, in most respects, is a bedroom community for workers traveling to Mankato. Highway 83 daily carries men and women away from their homes. My father, five days a week, left home for the Hiniker Company located just outside of Mankato. My dad worked from 1976 to his retirement in 2006 as a welder and forklift driver. Most commuting workers leave and return to Pemberton several times a week. Pembertonians leave the town for work, groceries, clothes, housewares, entertainment, and church.

Highway 83 brought my Dad home every workday and frequently he spoke to me about the greatness of Pemberton the town, the town I was itching to leave. He spoke of its greatness in precisely the opposite way that most would describe greatness. Greatness to him was a place that few people knew about. He would say with a smile on his face and a glint in his eye, "I know about the big cities, but those in the big cities don't know about me."

My father and mother brought me to Pemberton in April of 1976 and it is where I lived until 1994. Even with the move to college at age 18, I remained only 15 minutes away for an additional two years. During my first 18 years it seemed that half of the town had been my babysitter and the whole town constantly watched out for the children. At the first moment of misbehavior, a child's parents were given a full report. With so many eyes watching me, I was clearly part of a community much larger than my four-member household. The townsfolk intersected my life in dozens

of ways every day. These interconnections created a shared history and identity. These connections occurred most frequently at Pemberton School.

The Pemberton school building was the place where teachers, staff, and a community of support shaped and grounded the youth. For me, chief among the workers at the school was my mother, the third grade teacher. The Pemberton school building was where the children of Pemberton and the nearby town of Waldorf attended school for the first seven years. In the gym, the town watched the performances of their youth and each band concert and theatrical performance was done before a packed house. The school was the building where I and thousands down through the years learned to read and write, met lifelong friends, and came to understand our place in relation to theirs. It was where, more than at any other place, I came into contact with the life, culture, and traditions of the community.

Pembertonians' commitment to one another is seen in the all-volunteer Pemberton Fire Department which protected the town from harm. But the harm done by time and transition were not something the fire department could halt. By the 1980s the town's rosy days as a bustling business center had faded. Boarded up buildings with peeling paint served as historical reminders of better days in what seemed like a distant past. Rusting heaps of metal resembling automobiles often stood beside the old buildings. Every year or two an entrepreneur attempted to revitalize Pemberton by opening a new store, only to watch the business die a slow death. Its epitaph would include, "Century 21". No place exemplified this more than

the Pemberton Café as it opened and closed regularly under new management every few years. Eventually, even entrepreneurs lost faith and left the building abandoned. Other businesses, such as the clothing store, two banks, a lumberyard, and the creamery never experienced a second life.

Today, as in my childhood, the Motor Mart is both gas station and a source for food items when one is in a pinch. It also serves as a social gathering spot for retirees to drink coffee and play cards. For community members who desire something stronger than coffee, Jamie's Pub serves as the local watering hole. Jamie's Pub sees a lot of farmers looking for a hot meal, only to be replaced by the town's twenty and thirty-year-olds at night. Other businesses include White Fox Fur Company which prepares animal pelts for clothing, a U.S. post office that has recently closed, and the Hunting Elevator where Merlin Maass, the elevator's manager and father of a boyhood friend, gave me my first and worst cup of coffee.

Although my first cup of coffee was as black as the fields that surround the town, still darker memory comes to mind. The true Mecca of Pemberton and central player in the town's history is the school building that no longer has a school. In fact, half of it (the more beautiful half with parapet walls and towering windows that lit up the night sky) was razed in 2009 - a sad way to celebrate the town's 102 years of existence. The elementary school closed in 1995 and thus the school shares the same fate as other Pemberton institutions. Today, the children of Pemberton are bussed

out of the community. Pemberton and the former school districts that surrounded the town share a history of consolidation and eventual disintegration.[3]

In 1960, the citizens of Pemberton and Waldorf felt that they could work more effectively and efficiently together rather than remain separate. The towns were approximately equal in size separate only by seven miles; it seemed like a good marriage of equals. Yet, after more decline, the Waldorf -Pemberton school district in 1989 consolidated with the much larger town of Janesville. Janesville's population was three times greater than that of Waldorf and Pemberton combined. The awkward marriage between the communities plagues the school district and each of the communities. (For a chronology of the Pemberton school see Table 1).

[3] For look at the 1920 portion of the Pemberton School see Appendix.

Table 1

Chronology of the Pemberton School

• 1907	Pemberton is founded as a stop on the Alphabet Railroad.
• 1915-1916	Seven one room school districts surrounding vote to consolidate and build a single building as a primary and high school in Pemberton.
• 1920	Construction of Pemberton School with classes through the 12th grade is completed.
• 1954-1955	Pemberton voters approve and build an addition to existing structure. The addition includes four classrooms, auditorium, tool shop, and gymnasium.
• 1960	Pemberton and Waldorf consolidate to form the #913 located in Waldorf as well as grades 7-12. The Pemberton School consists of grades K-6.
• 1980	Janesville and Waldorf -Pemberton school boards agree to pair and share students.
• 1990	Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton school districts merge to form the Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton #2835 School District.
• 1995	The Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District votes to close Pemberton school building following the 1994-1995 school year.
• 2007	The portion of the Pemberton School built in 1920 is demolished.

QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

Some authors and academics like Diane Ravitch and Bruce Fuller have challenged the long established arguments of academics and politicians like Milton Friedman, Ember Reichgott Junge, and Rudy Perpich that open enrollment provides better educational opportunities through competition among schools for students. These and other proponents of open enrollment scarcely mention the effects of open enrollment on society. While they focus on an individual maximizing his/her educational options, I proposed other questions, such as the following. What is the interconnectedness among a small community and its school? How and to what degree has government educational policies especially Minnesota's open enrollment policy unintentionally influenced small towns? How are small towns educationally, economically, and socially harmed with the closure of the local school? And finally, how has the town of Pemberton Minnesota responded as perhaps a template for other small communities that have lost their community school?

To answer these questions, I examine the citizens of Pemberton in relation to their local school and the adjacent communities of St. Clair, Waldorf, Janesville and Mankato. I note the national, state, and local education policies that had unintended consequences to small towns and their schools. These polices include national desegregation laws and federal court rulings, local and state funding mechanisms, and school open enrollment. I inspect social pressures upon small towns such as the move away from small family farms to large farms and the subsequent migration of

many residents to urban centers. I chronicle the decision to consolidate Pemberton's school district with other communities. I address the consequences for Pemberton lacking the school as a community hub for more than a decade as the school building was closed in 1995. Furthermore, I dive into how the town reclaimed the building and began the struggle of restructuring a community identity while lacking a public school.

Chapter 1

EDUCATION IN PEMBERTON, ST. CLAIR AND WALDORF: THE EARLY YEARS

Small towns in rural America remind one of a bygone era. The pace of life is slower as the economic base remains tied to agriculture and thus the changing of the seasons still marks the passing of time rather than ticking clocks. Small towns and the farms that surround them are places where the myth is strong that an individual rises or falls based solely on a person's effort is strong. The national mythos of the individual culminates demands personal choice and allowing individual to choose his/her path. When adopted, the exalted status of the individual has drastic implications on communities and schools. But before examining the consequences of such an individualistic paradigm it is important to understand the economic limitations of much of rural America. Much of rural America is made of working class families who make their living farming, supplying farmers, or in current times commuting to larger cities for employment. As economic growth is largely limited among a communities populous it produces a sense of equality among a town's residents. When faced with personal challenges, those who live in small towns generally lend a helping hand or work together to create something that no one alone could do alone. The expectation exists that the favor might be returned to

them in kind during an hour of need. This cooperation among community members is what Harvard political science and public policy Professor Robert D. Putnam refers to as social capital.[1]

Social capital is created and draws people together to form a viable community. Community members share individual resources and abilities for the betterment of the whole. In many small towns the clearest sign of social capital is the public school. For generations the school stands as the mechanism whereby children are provided an opportunity equally for personal and civic growth and renewal. Certainly there are factors that dictate whether or not a student attains success beyond personal effort, such as a stable home life, disabilities, a family's economic viability, and quality of the teacher. But no matter these variables, the local school is without equal as the hub in which the community's life turns.

A NEEDED SHIFT

The history of American education has been shaped by reform movements that attempt to generate equal access to education as an integral part of a free society that strives for individuals to achieve their maximum potential. America's history is largely a struggle to reconcile the idea of personal freedom with providing an equal playing field. The tension between freedom and equality finds a traceable history in American education. Frequent topics covered within textbooks on the

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[1] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 19.

history of America's education are the disproportionate access to education afforded to some based on gender, race, and class. The subject of educational access in America's schools in the latter half of twentieth century is almost entirely focused on large inner-city school districts, thus leaving small town public schools largely unexamined. By ignoring the history of small town schools, the impression is that small communities matter little in the larger narrative of American education and remain immune to change. To counter these ideas, this chapter examines the dynamic transition of three small town communities in south-central Minnesota and how national struggles between individual freedom and the state's efforts to promote equality during the Progressive Era produced an environment whereby the centers of communal identity were embodied in the local school.

In the time of the industrial revolution America was a bubbling cauldron of change. From urban centers to rural communities, immigration and industrialization placed massive pressures on society and the educational system. The most common form of public schooling in rural America at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were one-room schoolhouses. One-room schoolhouses offered a basic education of reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as some basic civics and history lessons that promoted American patriotism, but little else in terms of formal education.[2]

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[2] H. W. Foght, *The Rural School System of Minnesota: A Study in School Efficiency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 7.

At the same time progressives argued for education beyond the one-room school, a growing number of rural citizens likewise felt the limitations of the one-room school. American rural families were similar to their urban counterparts in that as farming became more mechanized and the need for technical skills grew. Modern farms now included mechanized harvesters, tractors, and other equipment with all their attachments. It was clear to many rural Americans that "the one-teacher schools....proved unable to meet the needs of modern farming in preparing the children for practical and contented lives on the soil."[3] Increasingly farmers and progressive educators found common ground arguing for an education that stretched beyond grammar school to the secondary level.

Progressive educators looked to the high school to equip America's youth for the challenges of industrialization and then expanded to alter the whole of America's education system. At the end of the nineteenth century, high school education consisted mainly for the purpose of college preparation rather than offering courses that would be useful to a majority of students. This caused many to question why the general public should be taxed for such an institution.[4] In 1890, only one percent of students went on to attend a college and only five percent of the population

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[3] Gerald Gutek, *Education in the United States: A Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 117.

[4] Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 20.

attended high school.[5] Progressives challenged the notion that high schools ought to be simply centers for college preparation rather than something that all people needed to meet the needs of a modern industrial economy.[6] Progressive educators argued that, on the one hand, traditional subjects were ill fitted to meet the demands of a modern world and on the other hand the cost of attending high school placed education beyond the reach of the vast majority of Americans. For example, in 1907 Superintendent William Wit of the Gary Indiana's public schools created the Gary Plan whereby "[Education]....fostered hands-on activities relating to occupations and daily life."[7]

As the demand for industrial workers increased, so did the call of progressives to meet that demand with a fitting curriculum, first addressed in 1869 by Charles W. Eliot who coined the phrase "new education", which came to mean "manual training, industrial education, vocational education, commercial studies, domestic science, agriculture studies, and other occupational studies."[8] Similarly, Herbert Spencer in

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[5] H. W. Foght, 7.

[6] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago, IL: Forgotten Books, 2012), 83.

[7] Kenneth S. Volk. "The Gary Plan and Technology Education: What Might Have Been?" *The Journal of Technical Studies* (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University), 39, accessed July 10, 2014, http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JOTS/v31/v31n1/pdf/volk.pdf.

[8] Ravitch, *Left Back,* 51.

the 1850s stressed "education for utility" rather than an education for "general intelligence".[9]

A half century after Eliot and Spencer, John Dewey, a educator, philosopher, and renowned speaker, continued to champion the cause of an educational transformation, with subjects that were most important for the community and the students' everyday lives.[10] Dewey's 1916 book, *Democracy and Education,* emphasized "child-centered schools...based on the needs and interests of children".[11] Child-centered education was short for education that designed to meet the individual child's aspirations rather than an educational system directed by teachers, administrators, or communities. High schools at the turn of the century began to expand beyond the realm of college preparatory to offer elective course for students to achieve their personal goals.[12] A consequence of individualized class selections in small town schools was the emergent tension between serving an individual's educational desires and the community's ability to provide for the student's desires.[13]

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[9] Ravitch, *Left Back*, 26.

[10] Dewey, *School and Society*, 39.

[11] John Pulliam, and James Van Patten, *A History of Education in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 217.

[12] Gerald Gutek, *Education in the United States*, 119.

[13] The mantra of child-centered education was later praised by those who sought to open-enroll their children to another district and thus fracturing the social communities in which they lived.

Influenced by education reformers like Dewey, Spencer, and Eliot, the Progressive Education Association (PEA) met in Washington, DC in 1919 and listed seven educational goals with the sixth goal addressing the need for "cooperation between school and home to meet the needs of the child's life".[14] After the conference Dewey wrote, "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child that must be the community want for all of its children."[15] Communities like Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair took to heart the progressive reforms and attempted to provide schools that would provide a child-centered education.

In addition to child-centered curriculum, Progressives spearheaded the drive to make education available beyond the sixth grade regardless of ability to pay. In 1878 the Minnesota Legislature began to provide aid for established public high schools and in 1899 to increase aid to include rural districts. The state legislature hoped to establish more high schools.[16] Minnesota has a long history of promoting education. The small towns of Minnesota benefited from the commitment of education dating back to 1849 when the then Minnesota Territory created an educational fund in order to create uniformity.[17] Legislators passed a series of laws beginning in 1901 in order to "...encourage the consolidation of small districts into

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[14] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Hollywood, FL: Simon and Brown, 2011), 217.

[15] Dewey, *School and Society*, 19.

[16] Foght, *Rural School System of Minnesota,* 8.

[17] Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 96-97.

larger units..."[18] The purpose of the consolidation was to pool tax resources from a larger area to provide a free education to the 12th grade.

GETTING BIGGER

The promotion of a free education helped to close the gap between those who might otherwise only attend grade school and those bound to enter professional fields in the modern world. Yet in 1910, 9,000 of Minnesota's 14,000 public school teachers were employed in one-room schools.[19] By the first decades of the twentieth century, one-room schools were largely condemned by a large segment of the public as unfit to meet modern needs. State government officials argued that "larger school districts offered the benefits not only of economies of scale but also of enriched academic and extracurricular programming."[20] Clearly the Minnesota legislature believed that bigger schools made for a better education due to more class offerings. With little concern and a focus on the future, many of the schoolhouses were closed which cost many people a hub of communal life. As children traveled further from home in order to obtain an education so it would appear that the rural world offered little in terms of providing a viable future. This pattern of consolidation continues as the promise of a better education is held out, without bearing in mind the price is

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[18] Foght, *Rural School System of Minnesota*, 11.

[19] Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland,* 105.

[20] Richard O. Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 165.

measured in the loss of communal ties. As the country one-room school houses consolidated into single town schools, this action resulted in small towns becoming a greater hub of community activity that tied the surrounding area to the school. The closure of one-room school houses was a national movement with national repercussions both in terms of the decline of life of rural America and the growth of cities. In 1915 the United States had 200,000 one-room schools, but by 1944 the number had shrunk to 96,000.[21]

Coinciding with the building of high schools and the transformation of the curriculum was the tremendous surge of immigrants that streamed into America at the turn of the 20th century. The influx of immigrants and their need for a broader education than what was offered in grammar schools fit in with progressive initiatives to build more high schools. As a result high schools were built at a frantic rate. In 1890, the United States had 2,526 public high schools and by 1930 the number had swelled to 16,460.[22] The number of high school students rose from 110,277 in 1880 to 2,382,542 in 1920.[23] The greatest construction of high schools took place in America's urban centers as America's urban population grew from 15

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[21] Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland,* 107.

[22] Edward Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishing Company, 1964), 5; Robert Potter, *The Stream of American Education* (New York, NY: American Book Company, 1967), 376.

[23] William French, *American Secondary Education* (New York, NY: Odyssey Press, 1957), 100.

million to 45 million between 1890 and 1910.[24] Still in Minnesota, which was still at least 50 percent rural, the number of high schools rose from 17 in 1870 to 174 in 1905.[25] Regardless of the size of the community, towns large and small had a similar sense that dynamics of a changing economy demanded an education beyond grammar school.

The construction of schools through the twelfth grade in rural communities testifies to the desire of community members to provide education on par with much larger communities by raising local taxes as well as the will of state officials to provide the needed aid. To accelerate educational opportunities beyond 174 high schools, Minnesota's legislature passed the Holmberg Act of 1911, which provided 25 percent of the cost for new school construction.[26] Providing a competitive education in rural communities, though difficult, was nevertheless the state's goal for students in Minnesota. In fact, the ideal of equality in the public education system was written into the state's constitution. Article 8, Section 1 stipulates that, "...it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools."[27] The notion that there should be "a general and uniform system" essentially indicates that whether a child receives education in a small town or large city an equal

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[24] Gutek, *Education in the United States*, 200.

[25] Foght, *Rural School System of Minnesota*, 9.

[26] Foght, *Rural School System of Minnesota*, 11.

[27] The Constitution of the State of Minnesota Article 8, section 1, Minnesota Historical Society, http://www.mnhs.org/library/constitution/pdf/democraticversion.pdf.

opportunity exists as part of a healthy society. Residents showed loyalty to the district by willingly supporting the school's financial needs. In the towns of Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair citizens met the challenge by raising taxes, consolidating rural school districts, and building a school in each town.

AN ERA OF NEW CONSTRUCTION

Between 1917 and 1923, Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair each built new public high schools; starting with Waldorf in 1917. The Waldorf School District was established in 1915 by a vote of its townspeople and the surrounding townships. Through pooling of their meager resources, the district created a free public school and offered all children an education from grades 1-12. In just over two years, all students of the newly established district entered a new building on the north end of town. Certainly there were those who felt uneasy about the change, as noted by the 1915 vote where 139 voted for and 99 against building a new school. The loss of a school, no matter a building's condition, is of historical significance to the people who spent time there and made personal connections. Wayne Fuller recalls his childhood education in a one-room school house,

> The Midwestern rural school community was like an enlarged family to them [students], and provided them with a sense of security and encouragement. The door of the schoolhouse opened to Catholic and Protestant, to the children of the richest families in the community and the poorest, to native born and immigrant. [28]

[28] Wayne Fuller, *The Old Country School: The story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1982), 220.

While nostalgic, Fuller's recollection speaks of the democratic ideal imbedded into the one-room school houses where the children of one community felt equal and a sense of collective identity was fostered amongst the schools' surrounding populations. His viewpoint is shared by Professor Jerry Apps a former student of a Wisconsin one-room school house. He wrote:

> School reformers demonstrated that village and city school children did better than rural one-room school children on academic tests, and that this was a sufficient reason to close the little country schools. Burton Kreitlow, a Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, researched this topic and affirmed academic test score differences. But he also discovered that rural children always scored higher than city children on surveys measuring personal security...They were all part of their rural community...This may not have translated into higher academic test scores, but it did demonstrate that a good education was more than doing well on academic tests.[29]

Regardless of the richness of community present in one-room schoolhouses, they could not offer anything close to what was offered academically in urban schools. For instance, St. Paul's Central High School built in 1888 included a space observatory, which was far beyond anything a one-room school could offer. By 1890 the average amount spent on a rural school child was $13.23 per year while the average urban student received $28.87 towards education.[30] The majority of voters in Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair and the nearby townships sensed that they needed to provide a better education for their children and close the gap between

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[29] Jerry W. Apps, *One-room Country Schools: History and Recollections from Wisconsin* (Amherst, WI: Amherst Press, 1996), 192-193.

[30] Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 162.

themselves and larger, wealthier schools. With the closure of the one-room schools, these towns, whose population was measured in hundreds, fostered an enlarged and strengthened sense of community centered in the town school. As the local schools met the majority of children's educational needs the communities' attachment grew to their schools.

Regardless of the pride that accompanied the opening of each community's new high schools, small towns were mindful of how their schools compared to those in large communities. President Theodore Roosevelt, like many progressives, was concerned about the rapid movement from agrarian life to the industrial. In 1908, Roosevelt created the Country Life Commission in order to discover why so many people opted to leave the country for the cities and what could be done to curb the tide. The Commission attributed the siphoning off of rural population to a host of reasons. The reasons ranged from poor road conditions to a lackluster social scene, but the commission's ultimate blame fell on the schools.[31] To combat this tide of youth moving away from the rural areas, the Country Life Commission recommended that rural children be taught subjects that related to their everyday environment. Thus the proposed educational reforms of those like Eliot, Spencer, Ward and Dewey had reached the highest level of the U.S. government. This emphasis would influence all of American's rural communities. Thus, local schools struggled to provide, along with science labs and language courses, industrial arts, farming

[31] Fuller, *Old Country School*, 220-221.

practices, and home economics. When Waldorf's consolidated school building opened its doors in 1917 the building came with resources like a science laboratory, a library, and a manual training room. Most of Waldorf's residents embraced the idea of progress as the community pulled together celebrated its opening with a community dinner accompanied by the band and a student program.[32]

The residents of Waldorf, Pemberton and St. Clair, were indelibly connected to agriculture and had a similar outlook on the importance of the land. School clubs such as the Future Farmers of America (FFA) and later the Future Homemakers of America (FHA) connected students to the land and sought to shape their future. Each of the three schools had robust memberships in FFA and FHA. For decades they had participation rates of more than 40 percent of the high school student body and were seen as essential for readying children for adulthood.[33]

Although aware of their financial shortcomings, town officials each attempted to the best of their ability to provide an education for their children on par with larger schools. Though this was an elusive goal and beyond what the father of American sociology Lester Frank Ward called, "intellectual egalitarianism," nonetheless, because the district boundary limited, educational choice community

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[32] Myrtle Westphal, *A Touch of Waldorf History* (Waldorf, MN, 1999), 79.

[33] Membership in the Waldorf-Pemberton FFA had a membership of 39 which was about 50% of the male student body. In 1969 the FHA had a membership of 36 of and in 1972 the membership swelled to 50. Class sizes were typically 40-50 students per grade. For specific members in Waldorf-Pemberton FFA and FHA see Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton High School, *Colt Tales.* (Waldorf, MN: Graduating Class of 1969, 1969), Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton High School Library. Waldorf-Pemberton High School, *Colt Tales.* (Waldorf, MN: Graduating Class of 1972, 1972), Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton High School Library. Reading Room.

identity was firmly fixed in the community's school.[34] During this period of relative isolation, the communities sought to provide a child-centered education, but not at the expense of community and the whole student body. As electives were offered some students inevitably gained more skills than others, but each school and its community sought to bring equal educational access to all.

In 1915, the residents of Waldorf and Pemberton voted to consolidate the one-room country schools into larger more modern schools within each community. With a vote of 166 for and 58 against, Pemberton and its surrounding area voted to consolidate seven rural districts into a single district.[35] When Pemberton was founded in 1907, it had no school building and its residents were largely isolated from the rest of the world. The town school became a focal point for the community for more than eighty years. As Gary Lienke, a lifelong resident of Pemberton, stated, "[The school was] pretty much the hub of the community. All your activities [were] around [the school]. People were coming into town because they had kids in school. People would stop at the grocery store."[36] The school facilitated camaraderie between residents as a place to become acquainted with each other. Gerald Hofman who grew up and still lives just outside of Pemberton stated that "I used to know

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[34] Lester Frank Ward, *Dynamic Sociology; or, Applied Social Science, as Based upon Statically Sociology and the Less Complex Science* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Company, 1906), 204.

[35] *A History of the Pemberton School*, (Pemberton, MN, 2007), 9.

[36] Gary Lienke, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 31, 2012.

everybody [in Pemberton]."[37] The residents of Pemberton grew accustomed to one another and trusted each other through shared pride and concern for the well-being of their children.

Pemberton is named for a railway executive of the St. Cloud, Glencoe, Duluth, Mankato, and Albert Lea Railroad Company. The railroad company in time, and perhaps ease of memory, came simply to be known as "The Alphabet".[38] A section of The Alphabet passed through Pemberton in order to connect St. Clair to Albert Lea and the rest of southern Minnesota. Later, the railroad route served as the basis of Minnesota's Highway 83 which before 1955 was a gravel road that connected Pemberton to Mankato. Before the highway, the railroad line was the town's main lifeline. Due to the railroad not extending to Mankato, the major urban shopping center in the area, few passengers used the line. The railroad primary purpose was to bring supplies to the towns such as lumber, coal, groceries, hardware. But little left the town of Pemberton other than shipments of grain. Duane Hoffman, age 87, recalled as a child making the trip of then about 20 miles by car to Mankato once or twice a year for school clothes.[39] All roads in an out of Pemberton were gravel or dirt making automobile travel arduous.

Originally, Alphabet Railroad executives planned to build a depot in or near the town of Cream in 1905, a plan that brought to Cream's residents the promise of

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[37] Gerald Hofman, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 8, 2012.

[38] Myrtle Westphal, *A Touch of Waldorf History*, 9.

[39] Duane Hoffman, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.

growth and connection to markets. Cream was a small hamlet two miles southeast of present day Pemberton. When the railroad reached Cream on January 27, 1907, the area's residents, while standing in the snow accompanied by a full band, greeted the train.[40] Yet the warm welcome of the railroad to Cream did not translate into a bustling town; instead it was the beginning of the end for Cream. A land dispute prevented the Alphabet's depot from being built there. The dispute cast Cream's hope of its future to the wind. A land purchase a few miles north of Cream became the site of a new depot and town named "Pemberton". With the birth of one town came the death of another. By 1911, all of Cream's businesses, which amounted to a creamery, a country store and a blacksmith shop, along with its main community gathering spots—the Congregational Church and Modern Woodman Hall—moved to Pemberton. Within a decade, the town had grown to over 100 residents and as it grew so did the desire for a school within town limits.

Pemberton tied its identity to the school. In 1920 at a cost of $50,000, the construction of the consolidated school building in signaled a sense of arrival to the town's folk. No longer would Pemberton simply be a stop at the railroad line depot. The school held out the promise of education to future generations and would provide a community hub for the people of Pemberton. The construction cost of the building was equivalent to about $575,000 in 2012 dollars. A modest amount compared to most school districts of the period, yet for a town whose entire

[40] *Blue Earth County Minnesota* (Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 46.

economy was tied to small family farms the school was a tremendous undertaking. For the next 75 years, the Pemberton school building stood as a testament to the dedication of those early Pembertonians who saw and met the community's need for education and civic unity. Glen Schubbe recalled his days at the Pemberton school celebrating Creamery Day, "We had a meal. It was a community. Back then we had that old gym...the whole place was packed...It [the school building] played a big part."[41]

In the nearby larger town of St. Clair the value placed on education and collective identity remains evident. St. Clair is seven miles from Mankato located between Mankato and Pemberton. The town began not as a place for European settlers, but as the office headquarters of the Winnebago/Ho Chunk reservation in 1855. The town was originally called "Winnebago Agency", a name that remained on the post office until 1886 when it was changed to St. Clair.[42] The purpose of the reservation was to support the Ho Chunk subsistence farmers with family owned plots, plots that the Euro-Americans of St. Clair would soon occupy. After the defeat of the Dakota in the Dakota War of 1862, the Ho Chunk, despite their adamant

[41] Glen Schubbe, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, July 26, 2012.

[42] Myrtle Westphal, *Years and Memories* (Mankato, MN: Minnesota Heritage Publishing, 2005), 6.

refusal to join the war, were notified on April 25, 1863 that the U.S. government voted to remove them from Minnesota.[43]

Prior to the removal of the Ho Chunk, there had been a reservation school with 188 pupils in 1860.[44] By 1866 the Winnebago Agency boasted three general stores, two blacksmith shops, three wagon stores, two saloons, a hotel, and mill, but it was not until 1888 that some of the surrounding school districts, with their one-room school houses consolidated, built a multi-story brick building in St. Clair, a milestone for the little community. Classes ran through the tenth grade, which for the time was impressive for rural and small village schools of that time, when education commonly ended at or before the eighth grade. In 1923, the town built a new school house to provide classes through the twelfth grade. Like Pemberton and Waldorf, and countless other districts throughout the nation, the St. Clair school district provided a sense of community along with teachers, staff, books, transportation, extracurricular activities.

With the arrival of the Alphabet Railroad, which linked St. Clair to Albert Lea, St. Clair grew to approximately two hundred people by 1900.[45] The population of St. Clair for the next half century would range from two to three hundred residents. St. Clair's population has always been larger than of Pemberton and Waldorf due to

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[43] Matt Reicher, "The Ho-Chunk and Blue Earth, 1855-1863," *Minnesota Encyclopedia,* accessed July 10, 2014, http://www.mnopedia.org/event/ho-chunk-and-blue-earth-1855-1863.

[44] Myrtle Westphal, *Years and Memories* (Mankato, MN: Minnesota Heritage Publishing, 2005), 3.

[45] Westphal, *Years and Memories*, V.

its proximity to Mankato. Today, St. Clair's population of nearly 800 is almost double that of Waldof and Pemberton combined.

Like thousands of small communities across the nation each of the three communities beamed with pride, as resources were pooled, classrooms filled, and children received an education in the late 1800s that was beyond reproach. With a large amount of the communities' resources dedicated to these building projects, there can be little doubt that each town valued education and wanted to provide for its respective students.

In conclusion, the residents of St. Clair, Waldorf, and Pemberton based upon their construction of new consolidated schools with high school level academics, saw a need to compete with larger towns and provide students with some semblance of equality in relation to well-funded urban schools. With virtually no option of attending school elsewhere, the tension between freedoms of the individual to pursue his/her educational aspirations and the ability to provide an equal education largely lay dormant in these three communities. Yet the day would come when these towns, and countless others would compete in a zero-sum contest of school survival whereby some communities would lose their social hub and a large part of their identity.

Chapter 2

A TEMPORARY RESPITE IN A SEA OF REFORM

The identities of Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair grew strong in the years between 1920 and 1960 as each town enjoyed the cohesive community created by its local school. During this period, America's populace saw drastic social, technological, and economic changes taking place that altered education. This chapter provides a historical foundation of America's social changes such as desegregation efforts, the Cold War, and the promise of improving America's education through busing and competition, which would in the 1980s and 90s affect these three schools, their communities, and countless other small towns where most of the residents paid little attention to these social changes at the time.

Into the 1960s, the schools of Pemberton, St. Clair, and Waldorf generated a sense of local ownership, identity, and pride as they remained largely impervious from the rest of the world. They could truly be called "our school" as many townspeople still refer to them today. The Alphabet Railroad provided passenger service for a time, but few regularly traveled by rail. In the 1920s, most residents drove their one or two-horse wagons or later their car into town and did their business within the small confines of each business district. Businesses were in one

way or another connected to the surrounding land and were dependent on each year's harvest. The local banks loaned money directly to farmers in order for them to pay the local seed distributers. In the fall, elevators paid farmers who in turn paid back their bank loans. Indirectly, each town's grocery stores, hardware stores, auto and farm implement mechanics, bars, churches, barbers, and the schools all counted on agriculture revenues. A typical family was like Darrel and Gert Schubbe. He worked for the town's lumberyard and drove the school bus while she worked for the local fertilizer plant.[1] They earned their money in the town and spent their money there as well. As an example of each town's importance to the local area Pemberton, the smallest of the three towns, remarkably had four grocery stores to accommodate the town of 150 residents as well as the large surrounding population of farm families. As former Pemberton mayor, fire chief, and Sheriff's deputy Duane Hoffman recalled, there were seventeen farms in a three mile stretch going south of Pemberton and each farm held families.[2] Local people, both farm and town folk, focused on their immediate surroundings, paying little attention to the great social upheavals elsewhere in the nation. It was a time when, as Glen Schubbe of Pemberton explained, "...we didn't realize there was a world any bigger than our neighbor's fence."[3]

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[1] Lynda Born, interview by Paul Anderson, Waseca, MP3, May 24, 2013.

[2] Duane Hoffman, interview, June 14, 2013.

[3] Glen Schubbe, interview, July 26, 2012.

During the time when Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair remained largely secluded from the world beyond "the neighbor's fence", in the Jim Crow south and in northern suburbs, tensions arose over demands to desegregate the public square, which included public education. Since the 1893 Supreme Court Decision *Plessey vs. Ferguson* the inequality of separate but equal had been the law. The notion of separate, but equal was later challenged and overturned by the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas.* While legally *Brown* settled the matter that segregation of public schools created and sustained inequality, nevertheless, the court set no date when desegregation was to occur, only that it should be done in a timely manner. After a string of high profile showdowns between the National Guard troops, U.S. Marshals, and townsfolk in places like Little Rock, Arkansas, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Oxford, Mississippi, many white families chose to move to homogenous all-white neighborhoods. Governor George Wallace of Alabama bluntly summed up the fears of his constituents when he said in his 1963 inaugural address, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth....I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, Segregation forever."[4] His words reflected the popular notion that court ordered desegregation was

[4] George Wallace, Alabama Department of Archives and History, "Governor George C. Wallace's School House Door Speech," last modified December 12, 2012. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html.

tantamount to tyranny by the federal government upon what was considered by many as a local matter under local jurisdiction.[5]

One strategy to avoid desegregation was to use the expansion of the federal and state highway systems as an escape for millions of middle class families, mostly white, to the suburbs or to all white neighborhoods within a city's limits. This geographic shift was made all the more dramatic by the sequential fiscal shift that moved private capital in the form of houses and business from inner cities to suburbia.[6] The consequences of these shifts limited school equality as poor schools fell further behind, lacking the funds available. Inner city and rural schools share a similar struggle to keep pace in offering programs in comparison to more affluent suburban schools.

The formation of suburbs was dependent upon the interstate highway system. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 eventually saw the construction of 46,876 miles of roads.[7] Beyond the interstate, state officials increased spending on the improvement of state highways so the roads would be more efficient and comfortable as thousands of miles of gravel roads became long stretches of smooth thoroughfares. The highways opened up segments of the country for many people

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[5] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 3.

[6] Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 236.

[7] U.S. Department of Transpiration Federal Highway Administration, "Highway Statistics 2010," last modified December 1, 2011. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2010/hm20.cfm.

who had the means to work in the city and live in the country. Although the towns of Pemberton, St. Clair, and Waldorf are not located near an interstate, a new route for Minnesota State Highway 83 opened the world to these communities as never before. With a new highway, those who moved into these towns during and after the 1950s, increasingly employment in Mankato rather than in the town's historic agricultural businesses.

In 1953, work began on a new stretch of road marked as Minnesota State Highway 83. The highway was completed in 1955. Although the existence of Highway 83 dates back to 1933, prior to 1955, Highway 83's gravel roadbed was anything but direct as it meandered through the county. From Mankato, the newly paved route followed the rolling land to St. Clair and then after a subtle turn to the southeast, the prairie opens up and Pemberton is a seven mile straight shot with Waldorf another seven miles. Highway 83 made commuting to Mankato easier, causing significant changes to each town along its route. St. Clair's population grew from 324 in 1960 to 488 in 1970 to 665 in 1980. Since 1980, St. Clair's population had grown to 872 by 2010. Due to the longer distances from Mankato, by 2010 Pemberton's population had grown only slightly to 247, while Waldorf's population remained at slightly over 200. But whether significant growth occurred or not, businesses in all three towns began to close as people's purchasing habits shifted from the Main Street to Mankato. Loyalty to local establishments took a backseat to cheaper prices and more selection. Linda Born, who grew up in Pemberton in the

1950s and 1960s stated, "83 was the good road out of town. That lead to Rome or wherever..."[8] The number of times people traveled to Mankato grew from perhaps once a year prior to 1955 to, in many cases, once a day. The changed devastated each town's business community as it allowed a greater ability to travel. For example, by the 1980s all of Pemberton's four grocery stores closed along with the café, hardware store, lumberyard, two banks, and church. What remained was a bar, grain elevator, gas station, and little else. As noted by The Bureau of Field Studies and Research, College of Education, Mankato State University in 1987, "The community of Pemberton is almost a ghost town. With the exception of the housing development and the elementary school, there is little else that is viable."[9] Even St. Clair did not remain unscathed as its residents saw the closing of its hotel, hardware store, several grocery stores, which caused a long-time and current resident of St. Clair to mutter unflatteringly, "I live in rural St. Clair. We [he and his wife] spend more time in Mankato, of course. St Clair is dead."[10] The school was the largest employer and communal gathering place of each community.

As important as racial concerns were in the minds and streets of many American community members in the 1950s and 1960s, these were not the issues that faced small towns or their schools during the same time. The issues in small

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[8] Born Linda, interview by Paul Anderson, Waseca MP3, August 24, 2013.

[9] William R. Schroeder, and J. Daniel Beebe *An Analysis of the Human, Financial, and Physical Resources of the Waldof-Pemberton School District* (Mankato, MN: Minnesota State University Press, 1987).

[10] Bob Hoppe, interview by Paul Anderson, Mankato, MP3, August 1, 2012.

towns were focused on the price of corn, how the basketball team would do this year, who was going to make the new band uniforms, and who was taking whom to the prom? Duane Hoffman, the official law enforcement presence in Pemberton, recalls peaceful days. As mayor, Hoffman and the other small town mayors were deputized and during his time and were, besides an occasional drive through by a state trooper, were the only official legal presence. As a deputy for more than a decade, he recalled writing only two tickets for speeding and once demanding a person to pick up a pop can tossed out of a car window.[11] In Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair, residents lived quiet lives isolated from to civil rights struggles and the mounting antiwar protests. Yet, desegregation efforts eventually affected all schools either directly with the enforcement of court rulings or indirectly as whites moved to suburbs, which in turn caused a growing number of people to demand that their children have the right to open enroll.

As racial issues would in time affect all schools so did the Soviet Union's basketball-sized satellite, which whizzed around the world at 18,000 miles per hour.[12] On the heels of *Brown* and the federal desegregation efforts that followed, the Soviet Union launched its satellite, Sputnik. Its unsettling beeps were picked up by Ham Radio operators around the world. Americans were already gripped by anxiety as the Soviet Union had entered the nuclear age in 1949. As Sputnik began its orbit in 1957,

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[11] Duane Hoffman, interview, June 14, 2013.

[12] Danielle Burton, "10 Things You Didn't Know About Sputnik," *US News and World Report*, September 28, 2007. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2007/09/28/10-things-you-didnt-know-about-sputnik.

American anxiety increased, with fears that the U.S. educational system was lagging behind that of the Soviet Union. Americans had assumed that the U.S. was scientifically dominant. But with Sputnik came that the reality the Soviets challenged American superiority. Both the ordinary citizens and the U.S. scientific community of the U.S. demanded that the federal government extend its reach into the improvement of public education. Rather than calm the public's fear of the Soviet Union and reassure the public of their schools, in 1958 the federal government passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The NDEA solidified the notion that American schools had not kept up and had allowed the Soviet Union to pass up America and become the world's foremost technological superpower. While NDEA provided funding increases for mathematics and science, the monies went towards students who had shown the ability to comprehend the rigors of advanced learning.[13] The competition between Cold War superpowers and the fear of Americans falling behind the Soviet Union eventually trickled down to schools competing for supremacy. The demands of the NDEA and the seeming need for a greater emphasis on science and math in public schools took root in the America. In the future years and decades, a growing number of parents would demand the ability to send their children to district schools that provided a greater emphasis on science and math regardless of their place of residence.

[13] John Pulliam, and James Van Patten, *A History of Education in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 309.

The NDEA emphasis on offering certain courses to select students ran into opposition from progressives in the 1960s. Sixties progressives were steadfast in their goal to obtain equal educational opportunities no matter the income, gender, or racial background of students. No federal program spoke to disparity of equality in the classroom more than Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society". Johnson used his power of persuasion and the notorious "Johnson Treatment", described as "...a combination of cajolery, flattery, concession, arm-twisting threats and outright wooing...with an endless succession of telephone calls, bourbon-and-scotch lunches, barnyard jokes, the squeezing of elbows, the friendly arm around the shoulder, the cold stare when crossed" in order to press representatives to create Head Start in 1964.[14] The Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 provided $200 Billion in order to bridge the gap between underfunded school districts and well-funded schools.[15] But Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair saw no increased monies from the "Great Society" and Johnson's policies mattered little. Instead, these three schools methodically plodded along as the winds of change from Washington D.C. blew by with little impact on changing the town's focus, emphasis, or identity. For most students in small towns, little changed from the school where their parents were taught. For instance, Pemberton's High school offered only a handful of courses,

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[14] "After a Time of Tragedy, a Beginning toward the 'Great Society'," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1973. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/04/12/specials/johnson-tragedy.html.

[15] Patrick Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025?* (New York, NY: St. Martin Press, 2011).

including algebra, biology, history, English, geometry, shop, and bookkeeping.[16] During study hall, Darrell Schubbe recalled how students helped each other with assignments as they all took the same classes.[17] Even as Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair residents read about or watched the evening news descriptions of desegregation efforts, Sputnik, and Johnson's Great Society, no immediate changes took place. However, desegregation of the public schools, the demand for higher level course offerings in mathematics and science, and the eventual demand for accountability of education spending by the federal government played an invisible role in reshaping small towns and their schools. As money was allocated to schools for improvement, a handful of voices began to demand accountability for the funds and asked whether they met America's educational needs.[18]

Milton Friedman, a Nobel Prize winning economist with his wife Rose Friedman, a noted economist in her own right, argue that as the unregulated free market was the best means of insuring maximum growth on investments as well as promoting ingenuity, these economic principles ought to be applied to schools. In their book *Free to Choose a Personal Statement,* they outline an education paradigm where students are completely free to choose which schools to attend without

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[16] Darrell Schubbe interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.; Shar Quiram interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.

[17] Darrell Schubbe, interview, June 14, 2013.

[18] Stephen Sugarman and Frank Kemerer, *School Choice and Social Controversy: Politics, Policy, and Law* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 38.

restriction by any government agency.[19] Beginning in the early 1960s, the Friedmans argued that governments need to issue school vouchers directly to the students and force all schools public and private to compete for each student's tuition voucher.[20] The vast majority of progressive educators in the 1960s opposed the notion of schools competing for vouchers because doing so would only continue a culture of racial separation. Schools could admit students on the basis of race, which was the very problem that they were attempted to overcome. Furthermore, the line between church and state-run schools would be eliminated as vouchers could be used at religious institution. Yet, the seeds of the Friedmans' proposals were not permanently cast off to the dustbin of ideas; rather they lay dormant only to be resurrected two decades later with the 1980 presidential election of Ronald Reagan.

Court ordered desegregation of schools was limited by white flight to poor districts that often had a high rate of minority students likely to be poorer than their white counterparts. Johnson's Great Society attempted to bridge the gap in school inequality, yet although improvements were made, the education disparity between rich and poor and black and white continued. The unintended consequences of a better highway system had increased segregation the affluent and whites used the highways to move other parts of the city and surrounding suburbs. Education

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[19] Milton Friedman, and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose a Personal Statement* (Orlando, FL: Mariner Books, 1990), 170.

[20] Minton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education (1962)," The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/The-Role-of-Government-in-Education.aspx.

progressives in the 1970s championed the idea of busing children away from their neighborhood schools to other areas in order to promote equality through diversity. Many parents who had moved to homogenous neighborhoods opposed busing their children. This issue came to a head in the 1971 trial of *Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education.* The Supreme Court ruled that "the preservation of neighborhood schools could no longer justify racial imbalance."[21]

Resistance to busing was vividly illustrated in Boston in 1974. When U.S. Judge Arthur Garrity ruled that the city was in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the U.S. Constitution, some African American children began to be bused to all white schools while some white children were chosen to attend inner city schools. Some African Americans made their way from the bus stop to the school building, the children faced racial jeers, thrown objects, threats of violence, with little police protection. Some white children were told by community members not to go to school as a show of protest against the court's decision. Donna Bivens who was bused to an affluent white school recalled the civil strife over busing:

> And I was really shocked at the tension in the city. I remember walking with my little sister in Kenmore Square [Boston] and having a bottle thrown at us and I got spit at once. All over the city there was just, this, such rage and a sense of not having control over things.[22]

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[21] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 57.

[22] Delores Handy, "40 Years Later, Boston Looks Back on Busing Crisis," accessed January 4, 2013, http://www.wbur.org/2012/03/30/boston-busing-crisis.

Certainly Bivens' recollection speaks of the anger within many of Boston's communities, but also the loss of control over the neighborhood school. No longer would proximity to a school mean a connection to the school. Instead a district could manipulate the student body to reflect a diverse population. The sense of ownership and the identity that schools provide to the community is powerful no matter if it is in a rural or urban setting.

The ideal of desegregation was catching up with white flight and the reaction was turmoil. Due to court orders based on laws such as the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act of 1965, communities lost an ability to exercise busing autonomy over their schools. An Associated Press photo of a 1974 protest rally shows a gathering of angry people under a banner that reads "The family is more sacred than the state" as well as slogans harkening back to the days under British tyranny prior to the revolution.[23] Clearly people's attachment to the community was stronger than the greater social purpose. The fight for desegregation verse community autonomy was at an impasse. In Boston, court ordered busing challenged long-held ideas of locally controlled neighborhood schools.

[23] "New York Public Library, AAME :Boston Against Busing," *AAME :Boston Against Busing*. Accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/detail.cfm?migration=11&topic=99&id=600995&page=5&type=image.

School busing largely ended in failure as financially well off families increasingly moved out of city districts altogether and into the suburbs.[24] Challenges by busing advocates to end school segregation mounted against the attempts of suburbs to avoid busing programs. The issue came to a head in 1974 in a 5-4 decision the Supreme Court case *Milliken v. Bradley* that the suburbs were out of bounds for desegregation busing programs.[25] For the time being neighborhood schools and their student bodies were beyond government's attempts at restructuring. Yet at the same time not all families wanted their children to remain in their district school. Some argued for the choice to enroll their children in another district. Blocking the freedom of choice were laws that prohibited the transfer of students from one district to another without the authorization from both districts. Thus, while some parents and their communities wished to remain isolated from the inner-city schools, others sought to cross district barriers in order to secure a better education for their children. Rural districts relied on district boundaries to maintain enrollment stability. As state funds were tied to enrollment size, the loss of a few students could make the school financially unstable. Thus any movement towards school choice could jeopardize the ability of the school to continue. As Bob Hoppe, former superintendent of Waldorf-Pemberton schools, recalled, school district offices closely

[24] Katharine Seelye, "4 Decades after Clashes, Boston Again Debates School Busing," *The New York Times*, accessed July 10, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/education/new-boston-busing-debate-4-decades-after-fervid-clashes.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[25] L. Dean Webb, *The History of American Education* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2006), 286.

monitored their regions making sure that people attended the school in the district where they resided. [26]

The racial discord of which began in the 1950s and continued into the 1970s was only viewed from afar through the media by the residents of Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair. These three communities and the counties in which they resided were from their founding and continue to be largely racially homogeneous. Thus the National Guard was never called upon to allow children of color equal access to their schools. Likewise, there was never a protest march as people demanded justice, freedom, and a voice in the public arena. In the majority of rural towns in Minnesota, the population was and remains predominantly Caucasian. As Lynda Born, who grew up in Pemberton during the 1950s and 60s stated in regards to racial segregation and tension, "It wasn't even on the radar. We were all of European descent...I remember my dad saying that the first person of color he saw was on his senior class trip when they went to the Twin Cities."[27]

According to the U.S. census of 2010, Blue Earth County, which contains the towns of Pemberton and St. Clair, is more than 92 percent white. The greatest section of the county that has a racially diverse population is Mankato, which in 2010 was 88 percent white. It is clear that racial makeup of this area is quite homogenous. St. Clair in 2010 had a 94 percent white population, with Pemberton and Waldorf

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[26] Bob Hoppe interview, August 1, 2012.

[27] Lynda Born, interview, May 24, 2013.

white population at levels of 96 percent and 99.6 percent.[28] In Waldorf and Pemberton schools in the 1980s, the extent of racial diversity consisted of two Mexican students, three siblings adopted from Guatemala, an adopted Korean girl, and the occasional child of a migrant worker. Before these children attended school in the 1980s and 1990s there had been only a handful of children of color. Those living in Pemberton who were not native-born Americans consisted of a woman who fled Germany soon after the Russian occupation and a Vietnamese woman who married a Vietnam Veteran. Yet acceptance of others was just as narrowly defined in Pemberton as other communities north and south. For example, the only other person who was considered outside the mainstream's idea of normal was a homosexual man. Often harassed by tire tracks tearing up his yard, eggs frozen to his house, and an occasional homophobic slur, the man eventually moved.

Much of what Gerald L. Gutek wrote about small towns in the 1920s rings still true decades later in towns like Pemberton, Waldorf, and St. Clair: "...a tension existed between what could be regarded as two Americas: that of small-town and rural society and that of the big cities. Small town America (referred to as "Main Street" by Sinclair Lewis) defined American ethical life in terms that still resembled the McGuffey reader frame of reference. Fundamentalist, religious values, patriotism, isolationism..."[29] and fear of outsiders or those who were seen as

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[28] Minnesota Demographics by Cubit, "Minnesota Demographics Summary," last modified 2013. Accessed December 27, 2013, http://www.minnesota-demographics.com/.

[29] Gutek, *Education in the United States*, 234.

different from the norm. No matter how sheltered the people of St. Clair, Waldorf, and Pemberton were on national movements and educational reforms, fights over accessibility, equality, and access, impacted these and countless other communities.

Although Milton Friedman is credited with the genesis of school choice by intellectuals like Stephen D. Sugerman and Frank R. Kemerer in their book *School Choice and Social Controversy*, without the historical context of the efforts of desegregation and changing academic demands school choice would likely have had little traction in changing longstanding educational policy. Unlikely disciples of Friedman appeared such as the progressive John Holt of Colorado. Holt, and those of like mind, argued that schools ought to develop their curriculum around the interests of their students and provide them with the freedom to learn what is most relevant to them. The focus on the individual's interests harkens back to John Dewey who argued that schools need to engage students with hands-on training such as industrial arts.[30] Yet, what was academically relevant in the 1920s had changed in the post-Sputnik era as science and technology would dominate the conversation on where public schools around the nation ought to focus their energies. Gone was the time when rural schools provided students an education that mostly emphasized what a student needed in order to live in a small community. As Professors Craig B. Howley and Aimee Howley argue, "Consistent with neoliberal ideology, accountability-based school reform stresses individual achievement,

[30] Ravitch, *Left Back,* 389.

competitiveness, choice, and economic growth in an increasingly globalized economy."[31]

Thus communities which had lived in seemingly isolate worlds like that of Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair were penetrated by the call for education to have a global perspective instead of merely a local one. Inherent within the idea of a relevant curriculum was individuality, for what might be relevant to one student may be deemed useless to another. Libertarians and progressives, found common ground on the subject of school choice. Another school progressive, A.S. Neill, wrote *Summerhill* about the private school he ran dating back to 1921. The book, originally published in 1960, was largely a failure in terms of sales; however, by 1970 the book was selling 200,000 a year and was required reading in over 600 university courses.[32] In *Summerhill*, Neill argued that children's minds needed to be liberated from the current curriculum. As Diane Ravitch points out, for Neill there was "a mismatch between children and the schools; if the schools were going to educate the children they would have to change."[33] With the emphasis on self-expression and exploration it was only a matter of time before parents began to seek out schools that utilized the *Summerhill* model and embraced the idea of educational options, even if that occurred at the expense of community loyalty towards the local school. Sales of

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[31] Craig B. Howley and Aimee Howley, "Poverty and School Achievement in Rural Communities," *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century,* ed. Kai A. Schafft and Alecia Youngblood Jackson (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 99.

[32] Ravitch, *Left Back*, 387.

[33] Ravitch, *Left Back*, 391.

Summerhill show the growing number dissatisfied parents regarding their local schools.

The marriage between Freidman's voucher approach to education and progressives who wished to provide better education to poor urban children culminated in 1990 in the Milwaukee Public School District. Due to many middle class families taking advantage of their ability to move out of city centers, schools in the inner cities grew poorer and fell further behind their suburban counterparts. With political limitations on busing due to the outcry as seen in Boston, new remedies to meet the challenge of educating greater numbers of poor children were explored. Milwaukee's school district allowed low-income children the opportunity to leave their local school for seemingly a brighter education in more affluent schools.[34]

Many persons of color had grown tired of "one size fits all" education, but were without the financial means to move to another community. With teachers unions firmly against the notion of open enrollment (that is the ability to enroll in a district of a student's choosing regardless of his/her residence), concerned parents sought answers from the political right. Limited to poor inner-city children of Milwaukee, students could apply for a yearly voucher of $2,500 to be used at any school of their choosing, public or private. Advocates of the sanctity of public schools and a high wall of separation between church and state were bitter. Herbert J.

[34] Sugarman and Kemerer, *School Choice and Social Controversy,* 278.

Grover, Wisconsin's superintendent of public instruction called Wisconsin's voucher a "gun shot against public schools."[35] Although limited in scope, cracks in the wall which contained students within district boundaries were beginning to show. Soon entire states would examine Milwaukee's voucher plan and the call for options grew louder.

An additional remedy to bypass controversy concerning state funding of religious schools, has been demonstrated by the St. Louis school district, which has since 1983 allowed students to transfer out of lackluster urban schools made up of an entirely African-American student body to better funded suburban schools. Unlike some transfer policies, the St. Louis plan funds the transportation costs for students to journey from one district to another.[36] Rather than helping to improving low testing schools by providing more resources, instead this policy hampered neighborhood schools even more due to declining enrollments. Those who remained in the local school were less likely give parental involvement.[37] Growing numbers of people argued that these programs, by offering enrollment options to some students and not to others, violated the U.S. Constitution's equal protection clause. Thus, call for statewide choice options grew in the 1980s, eventually culminating in several states allowing open enrollment at the expense of local schools. Any notion that the

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[35] Peter Crookson, *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 68.

[36] Bruce Fuller and Richard Elmore, *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1996), 29.

[37] Fuller and Elmore, 31.

American public education system was a bastion of equality was being eroded rapidly as more parents refused and fought against progressive attempts provide a more equal education through busing.

A consequence of limiting choice for most inner-city students to a district's boundary was key to the continued establishment of a rural community's identity as rural children had little choice of where to attend school. As the battles and debates over public education churned during most of the twentieth century, the residents of Pemberton, St. Clair and Waldorf and much of the rest of rural America went on with their lives with what appeared to be a certain future that their local schools were safe. Efforts by reformers to improve schools and society were, to these small towns, distant and irrelevant. However, the consequences of these reform efforts from desegregation, to busing, to vouchers eventually would reach even remote communities altering the towns forever. A world existed beyond the neighbor's fence.

Figure 1

Boston Citizens Protesting Busing Policies in 1974

Chapter 3

CONSOLIDATION AND IDENTITY: WHAT'S GAINED–WHAT'S LOST

Like many inner-city school districts that were and are currently troubled as a result of flight to the suburbs, schools in St. Clair, Waldorf and Pemberton were financially outmatched by suburban schools. They had difficulty providing the wide variety of elective courses offered by larger schools. Equality in schools was limited by both racism and funding differentials between urban and rural schools. In chapter I examine small town local school districts that struggled with enrollment declines. This, in turn, limited resources for curriculum, leaving few means to keep their schools open. These choices included: consolidate with another school district; dissolve the district; or raise local taxes. School district offices and citizens of Waldorf-Pemberton, Janesville, and St. Clair wrestled with these problems of solvency and the potential consequences of forming new identities as they dissolved old ones.

Prior to Minnesota's comprehensive funding reforms in the 1950s and again in the 1970s, districts were primarily funded by passing referendums that raised a district's taxes. The higher the tax base, the greater the class offerings and resources available for students. The towns of Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair from

conception until the 1980s were three communities in a vast region of small farms of a couple hundred acres that stretched across southern Minnesota. But as transportation changes remade the landscape, so too would improved roads reorganize the character of small towns and their schools. Rural districts tied to agriculture were no financial match for districts housing large multimillion dollar companies resided. Family farms rarely lucrative and these were times when kids from the country sometimes peddled live chickens door-to-door to make money.[1] Personal interest in the school's budget was therefore high in the minds of farmers, as they stood to pay the most from an increase in property taxes. Thus farmers often made up the majority of school board members in all three districts. It was no wonder that despite the initial investment in the construction of the schools, citizens tightly monitored with requests for many improvements pushed for later discussion. The lack of provision for supplies is noted that a Christmas gift of a small electric burner was given as a gift to Superintendent Bob Hoppe due to his frequent statement that requests for funds would have to go on the back burner.[2] While no one admitted to buying the gift, all recognized the gift's meaning.

In 1915, Minnesota passed its first educational aid law in order to help bridge the funding gap between rural low-levy districts and their more affluent city counterparts. Minnesota officials clearly tried to live up to the state's lofty goal of

[1] Duane Hoffman, interview, June 14, 2013.

[2] Clarice Anderson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, Telephone conversation, July 20, 2013.

equality and the duty of funding schools across the state as dictated by Minnesota's Constitution.

> The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools. The legislature shall make such provisions by taxation or otherwise as will secure a thorough and efficient system of public schools throughout the state.[3]

Neither Pemberton, Waldorf, nor St. Clair qualified for this aid. Although far from wealthy, the communities simply were not poor enough. Some funds trickled from the state to small town communities because state officials distributed a portion of the 1933 state income tax collections based on enrollment.[4] But as the income tax came during the heart of the Great Depression, the allotment provided only minor financial relief. Funding changed little in Minnesota for the next two decades until 1956 when the state become the primary contributor to public schools with comprehensive funding provision provided millions of dollars.

Gregory R. Thorson and Jessica L Anderson in their article "The Minnesota Miracle Abandoned?" recall this transformative time for Minnesota Schools.

> Foundation aid emerged in 1957, which for the first time shifted the majority of school funding from local taxes to the state. Initially, the base per-pupil formula allowance covered the majority (84%) of per-pupil maintenance costs, but unfortunately it did not grow fast enough to keep up with inflation and increasing costs. As a result

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[3] "Constitution of the State of Minnesota," Minnesota Historical Society. Accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.mnhs.org/library/constitution/pdf/democraticversion.pdf.

[4] Gregory R. Thorson and Jessica L. Anderson, "The Minnesota Miracle Abandoned? Changes in Minnesota School Funding, 2001-2007," *Rural Minnesota Journal* 28. Accessed July 1, 2013, http://www.ruralmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/The-Minnesota-Miracle-Abandoned.pdf.

> within 13 years the percentage of costs covered by the state through this allowance formula had fallen back below half (43%) of districts' total costs.[5]

This temporary boost in funds had been a welcome relief to Pemberton, Waldorf and St. Clair as each district had commissioned large building projects and would now more readily pay off bank loans, thus spending less on interest and more on education. For Pemberton, work began in 1954 on a $200,000 expansion that included several new classrooms and a proper gym that its boys' basketball team would make famous in their run to the Minnesota state tournament in 1957.[6] Waldorf began its building project in 1951 with a gymnasium, classrooms, and lunchroom at a cost of over $300,000.[7] With the arrival of state funds, St. Clair's residents approved in 1960 a massive expansion of twelve classrooms, cafeteria, industrial arts shop as well as the renovation of the older building to double the size of the library, science department, home economics department, and provide accommodations for the new music department. The St. Clair school improvements were made in a town with a population of 342 while Pemberton and Waldorf's populations hovered around 200. State funding shifts allowed small town schools to remain afloat and independent if only for a short while. In the coming years the districts saw steady school population declines due to farms becoming larger, families becoming smaller, and an older average age. Funding worries grew as

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[5] Thorson and Anderson, "The Minnesota Miracle Abandoned?, 2.

[6] *A History of the Pemberton School*, (Pemberton, M.N.: 2007), 1.

[7] Myrtle Westphal, *A Touch of Waldorf History* (Waldorf, MN, 1999), 81.

enrollments declined sense state officials tied state dollars to enrollment numbers. Thus, though these schools "played a central role in the social life of the community" increasingly these could offer only a "no frills" education.[8]

Urban centers offering employment opportunities drew many rural and small town residents. In turn small school districts were faced with declining enrollments. Assisting in the rural population decline were technological improvements making farming physically less taxing and subsequently requiring fewer farmers. To combat population losses, school districts in these agricultural communities sought to pool their resources with other struggling communities in order to sustain previous education initiatives. For example, in the 1950s, the number of school districts in the United States decreased from 40,520 to fewer than 18,000.[9] In 1945, Minnesota had more than 7,600 school districts and by 1972 the number was reduced to fewer than 450.[10] This period of massive consolidation and subsequent closures of local schools touched many small towns the size of St. Clair, Waldorf, and Pemberton, but unlike other rural communities more isolated from large population centers, the proximity of these three towns to Mankato helped to stabilize their populations. Thus school closures were staved off, if only for a time.

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[8] Richard O. Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 165.

[9] Dean L. Webb, *The History of American Education: A Great American Experiment* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2006), 267.

[10] Clifford E. Clark. Jr., ed., *Minnesota in a Century of Chance* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1989), 486.

By 1960, despite increased state aid, the school Pemberton and Waldorf districts were among the many to face the reality of either shutting their doors or consolidating. As the farms that surrounded the towns consolidated and became larger, aided by modernized equipment, it meant fewer school children. The three-mile bus route south of Pemberton that once had seventeen family farms was reduced to two as families left to try their fortunes elsewhere.[11] Farms grew in size from the 160 acre farms at the turn of the century up to 20,000 acre farms of today.[12] Although enrollment at the newly formed Waldorf-Pemberton district had staved off small class sizes by combining grades, eventually the trend of declining enrollments hampered the newly-formed district, especially in the final years of its existence. By 1987, several of the high school courses had less than fifteen students enrolled in them and some had as few as five. By 1989, Waldorf-Pemberton High School's last graduating class enrolled a scant nineteen students.[13]

The origin of the Waldorf-Pemberton School District began at the start of the 1961-1962 school year. With the communities similar in size, they united largely as equals, although not without some pains, especially to Pemberton which lost a significant part of its identity in the closure of its high school. Resident Duane Hoffman recalled, " Well, you lose your identity...the [High] school was the most important thing we had in Pemberton. Other things don't count as much to promote

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[11] Duane Hoffman, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.

[12] Glen Schubbe, interview, August 1, 2012.

[13] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 16.

the town. The school was the center of, more or less of the whole city."[14] Pemberton High School memories have not faded especially its crowning moment in 1957 when the boys' basketball team made the Minnesota state tournament. It remains the smallest high school ever represented in the state tournament. Although it lost both of its tournament games, the people of Pemberton greeted the team as heroes. Rare still today is a conversation about the Pemberton School that does not soon return to the '57 team. Of Pemberton's population of 128, only twenty-two residents stayed home as the games were played. The rest journeyed to Minneapolis to watch their boys play.[15] The spirit of Pemberton was evident as Shar Quiram recalled, in the wool uniforms made for the band by Pemberton residents. [16] The uniforms signaled the importance of the students looking their best as they represented the community. The surrounding communities such as Waldorf followed Pemberton's run and later incorporated the achievement into a shared identity of Pemberton and Waldorf after consolidation. A few years after consolidation, the Waldorf-Pemberton Colts played the St. James Saints, the team the Pemberton Tigers had beaten in a regional game 1957 in order to qualify for the

[14] Duane Hoffman, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.

[15] Dan Nienaber, "Hoops big in Pemberton," *Mankato Free Press*, 11 August 2007. Accessed February 19, 2014, http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/x519271984/Hoops-big-in-Pembertons-history/print.

[16] Shar Quiram, interview, June 14, 2013.

state tournament. The Colts hollered in unison, "Send the Saints back to heaven, like ***WE*** did in '57" (emphasis added).[17]

With the shared identity came the sharing of students and the upkeep of two facilities. The sharing of facilities would later play a key role in the district's financial struggles. With the consolidation, Pemberton lost grades seven through twelve, while Pemberton's school building incorporated Waldorf's children from kindergarten through the sixth grade. The newly paved Highway 83 was key in the consolidation, making travel time was less than ten minutes. The most important reason for the success of the consolidation was that each community kept its local school. The school buildings remained vibrant in each community. At the onset of the consolidation, class sizes increased in many cases to over fifty students. In comparison, a number of times in the previous years the Pemberton High School was without a graduating class and rarely rose to above two dozen. Due to proximity to Mankato, the St. Clair school district was larger and thus it school board did not feel the need to consolidate with another school district. The ability to remain independent served St. Clair well in retaining the central identity of the town with the school.

By the 1970s the ever growing gulf between the financially struggling and well-off school districts was brought before the state's high court which had to decide whether the financial gulf was in violation of Minnesota's constitution. White

[17] Dave Marzinske, interview by Paul Anderson, Waldorf, MP3, August 2, 2012.

Bear Lake parents contended, "the system denied their children substantially equal educational opportunity and required them to pay higher tax rates than those in wealthy districts to receive the same or lesser expenditure level."[18] In the 1971 landmark decision, which paved the way for the so-called "Minnesota Miracle", a federal court in *Van Dusartz vs. Hatfield* ruled, "The taxpayers in a property-poor district cannot be required to pay a higher tax rate than taxpayers in a property-rich district to attain the same quality of education for their children."[19] According to Myron Orfield and Nicholas Wallace of the William Mitchell College of Law,

> With the court's ruling came the passage of the 1971 "Minnesota Miracle" where
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> > The 1971 Legislature addressed these disparities by substantially increasing the amount of equalized state foundation aid per pupil unit and imposing a uniform statewide limit on the property tax rate for schools. The 1973 legislature eliminated flat grants and established a system whereby the amount of foundation aid program revenue available per pupil unit to low-spending districts would be increased to the state average over a six-year period.[20]

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[18] Tim Melcher, "Minnesota School Finance History: 1849-2005," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed February 10, 2014, http://archive.leg.state.mn.us/docs/2009/other/091030.pdf. 4.

[19] State of Minnesota House Research, "Minnesota School Finance: A Guide for Legislators." Last modified November 2013. Accessed February 10, 2014, http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/mnschfin.pdf.

[20] Myron Orfield and Nicholas Wallace, "The Minnesota Fiscal Disparities Act of 1971: The Twin Cities' Struggle and Blueprint for Regional Cooperation," William Mitchell College of Law, March 7, 2007. 2. Accessed February 109 2014, http://www.wmitchell.edu/lawreview/Volume33/documents/4.Orfield.pdf.

The average district prior to the "Minnesota Miracle" received around 55 percent of its money from the state; after passage of the bill, the rate jumped to 93 percent.[21] Some like, G. F. Minea the representative of the Dakota Country Development Association, called the plan "metropolitan socialism."[22] Yet, Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair residents welcomed this change as state monies flowed into their coffers as never before. The ruling was a clear victory for struggling school districts across Minnesota. Equality it seemed was closer than at any other time for districts like Waldorf-Pemberton. The districts remained solvent because of state aid.

Because the state legislature had tied to school enrollment, as long as enrollment numbers remained stable the future of Waldorf, Pemberton, St. Clair and other community schools remained secure. However, demographics noted a continued decline of children in rural areas. During the 1980s, the farm crisis hit rural Minnesota hard, with populations decreasing by as much as 20 percent.[23] Not only were there less farms and fewer farm families, but young adults increasingly moved to urban communities to find work. Former bus driver, local business owner, and now Pemberton resident Darrell Schubbe recalled that in the 1960s it took four buses to pick up the children in the Pemberton area, but by the late 1980s, only one bus

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[21] Thorson and Anderson, "The Minnesota Miracle Abandoned?", 3.

[22] Thorson and Anderson, "The Minnesota Miracle Abandoned?", 6.

[23] Joseph Amato and John W. Meyer, *The Decline of Rural Minnesota* (Marshall, MN: Crossing Press, 1993), 17.

was needed.[24] Pemberton's elementary class sizes that had once numbered in the fifties during the 1960s had withered by the 1980s down into the twenties. Dave Marzinske, a lifelong farmer and former Waldorf-Pemberton school board member, recollected that his daughter, a 1985 graduate, was one of only two girls in her class.[25] No longer could the 1980s student take the same high school courses as had been offered a generation or two earlier and expect to be prepared for college. Electives were offered but, as Bob Hoppe recalled, it was gradually more difficult to keep courses open with so few students.[26] The people of Waldorf and Pemberton began to increasingly worry about course offerings. Sue Kipp, mother of Ben Kipp, class of 1992, recalled her concern about the lack of courses at W-P. She stated that Waldorf -Pemberton was struggling to offer her son Ben courses in science to prepare him for a future in medicine.[27] Waldorf's former principal Mike Mudeking recalled the difficulty of scheduling for students like Ben:

> The biggest job I ever had here was 75% of the kids were in band... During that hour I had 8 or 10 teachers with nothing to do. It was such a small amount of kids. That took that whole last hour out and now I don't have a 6th or 5th hour period. You try to put all those kids who want all these different classes that weren't there. It was just a nightmare. But if you have 2-3-4-5 of each section...like they do in the bigger schools [it is easier to offer different classes].[28]

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[24] Darrell Schubbe, interview, July 26, 2012.

[25] Dave Marzinske, interview, August 2, 2012.

[26] Bob Hoppe, interview, August 1, 2012.

[27] Susan Kipp, interview by Paul Anderson, Janesville, MP3, interview July 20, 2012.

[28] Mike Mudeking, interview by Paul Anderson, St. Clair, MP3, August 9, 2012.

Lynda Born, who grew up in Pemberton and later was both the W-P and J-W-P district office manager, recalls her childhood:

> "...when all the buses came to town [Waldorf] they were full. All the farmhouses had families in them of three or four children and now you drive down the road and there aren't any people living there...the whole countryside has changed a lot."[29]

In the Waldorf-Pemberton School District, consolidation with a nearby school district, as undertaken in 1961, was probably needed to keep a school viable for Waldorf and Pemberton students. Yet at what cost? As university academics like David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle argue, "Schools of modest size tend to have additional advantages. They promote community feeling and the idea that students should be sharing ideas and experiences with each other...students are far more likely to bond with smaller schools than with very large ones."[30] The residents and students of Waldorf-Pemberton District discovered that consolidation with another school district could bring the loss of the very center of their communities.

The districts near the Waldorf-Pemberton school district that were most likely suitors were Janesville and St. Clair. These communities, despite being larger than Waldorf or Pemberton, also struggled and faced further enrollment declines. For example, it was projected that enrollment would drop in Janesville district by 24.1 percent among students K-6 and 13.1 percent among students 7-12 in the five

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[29] Lynda Born, interview, May 24, 2013.

[30] David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), 296-297.

years after 1986.[31] Janesville residents weighed their options and considered consolidation as a possible solution. Furthermore, as in St. Clair, Waldorf, and Pemberton, Janesville faced the reality that a number of the town's young people were leaving town. This demographic shift put more of the economic burden on middle aged and elderly residents.[32]

THE LIMITS OF DIVERSIFYING EDUCATION

With the 1957 launch of the Soviet Union's satellite Sputnik I the United States reacted in fear that its education system had fallen behind the Soviet Union in math and science. To meet the putative educational gap parents and congress demanded that the U.S. K-12 educational system provide more upper level courses in math and science. This emphasis on math and science, at the cost of other academic pursuits, served to intensify a division among students whose plans involved careers in farming and those whose careers moved them beyond the towns. This effect became more noticeable with each passing year in the Waldorf-Pemberton district and would place a financial burden on the district to meet the student needs.

The diversification of education in the decades following the space race stretched the district's funds. By the mid-1980s, students were offered a choice of thirteen electives to future farmers and another six for future homemakers. While

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[31] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 16.

[32] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 8.

many argued that the education offered by the local school with its traditional electives was enough, others desired an education that emphasized science, math, and computers. Thus, the district officials also argued that they needed to provide four electives in upper level math and computer programming, four electives in science, and another four English/Speech elective offerings. [33] The same or greater course demands were found in the St. Clair and Janesville districts at this time. In order to offer these courses, school districts were faced with few options: either raise taxes, consolidate, or dissolve. Janesville, with a population of nearly two thousand and situated between Mankato and Waseca was by far the largest of the towns in the area considering consolidation in the 1980s. Like Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair, the Janesville business community was sustained by agriculture. As agriculture demanded fewer people and the average life expectancy rose it contributed to a declining and aging population. The result of these demographic shifts meant that fewer children were being sent to the public school and ultimately less state money harvested. Janesville's schools, like many other districts, had deficit budges. Janesville's school board faced a choice to either consolidate with another district or raise taxes to make up for the loss of funds. St. Clair faced the same dilemmas of providing an education that was student-centered while keeping the district afloat financially.

[33] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 22-44.

In 1986, district representatives of Waldorf-Pemberton, Janesville and St. Clair met to address declines in enrollment and consider possible solutions. In a combined effort, the three districts hired the Bureau of Field Studies and Research College of Education (BFSRCE) through Mankato State University in order to analyze each of the schools and their community's strengths and weaknesses as well as provide possible solutions to the tenuous futures. The BFSRCE writers clearly spelled out the declining health of the four towns, but also reported the reluctance of community members to consider reconfiguring the districts. Pemberton and Waldorf were reported to have an economic base that was "depressed on all fronts".[34] The population of the Waldorf-Pemberton district was 13.6 percent below the state average for 20-39 year olds. The 20-39 year old range constitutes childbearing ages, which means that the district's future appeared bleak as fewer children meant less school district revenue.

All of the districts had experienced a 3.5 to 5.6 decline in enrollment and the BFSRCE projected that by 1992 kindergarten through the twelfth grade would see a decline between 11.1 and 20 percent.[35] As state funds were based on enrollment numbers, each district faced the realization of either making up the monies with tax dollars pr cutting back on services such as course offerings, and/or consolidating resources. Each of the schools faced or were already implementing draconian service cuts. The Janesville district operated with a part-time elementary principal, old

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[34] William R. Schroeder and J. Daniel Beebe, *Long Range Planning Alternatives for the Janesville, St. Clair, and Waldorf-Pemberton School Districts* (Mankato, MN: Bureau of Field Studies and Research, College of Education, Mankato State University, 1987), 6.

[35] Schroeder and Beebe, *Long Rand Planning*, 8.

textbooks, no elementary counselor, no computer classes, no programs for high-achieving students, and no vocational education programs. Similarly, St. Clair had one principal serving the entire school K-12, no media person, and no vocational education. Furthermore, cuts were likely to be made to industrial technology, mathematics, computer, science, home economics, business education, and art. The Waldorf-Pemberton district was facing the same constraints as Janesville and St. Clair. Due to the wide range of necessary electives and the budget restraints the days of Dewey hands-on approach to education seemed less and less feasible.

Although each of the four towns loved and expressed loyally to its local school, some were in much better shape than others. Although each district faced what appeared to BFSRCE as imminent budget shortfalls, St. Clair and Janesville had a greater tax base, which allowed for better maintained buildings. Each of these districts only had one school building to maintain. Pemberton's older structure which dated back to the origins of the district in 1920 was falling apart. The report clearly noted what few in Pemberton wanted to believe, that the "older portion should be taken out of service as soon as possible."[36] In other words, the building was too far gone to salvage. The report of the building's decay came as no surprise to teachers, janitors, or residents. When asked about the overall condition of the

[36] Schroeder and Beebe, *Long Range Planning*, 13.

school, long-time teacher at the Pemberton school Kathy Dierks replied, "Not Good. Not good at all...It was embarrassing to have people come in..."[37]

DECLINE AND DECISION TIME

By 1980 the size of the enrollment in Waldorf and Pemberton was similar. However, the student populations were extremely different. Whereas the capacity of Waldorf's school was only at 36.4 percent, Pemberton's building was at 93.8 percent.[38] There was a clear bubble of young children making their way through the Waldorf-Pemberton school district. The majority of the students came from Pemberton area. In the 1970s a federal housing program had been created in order to help low income, first-time homeowners borrow money at reduced interest rates. As a result, for the first time since the Alphabet Railroad decided to open a depot in 1907, Pemberton began to see significant growth. Young families flooded into Pemberton and in less than a decade built over two dozen new homes. According to Pemberton resident Clarice Anderson, who purchased a home with her husband in 1977, because of the federal housing programs, their payments were a mere $212 a month.[39] Like other families who might have otherwise lived in Mankato as renters, they found cheap lots, low taxes, and a laid-back lifestyle unavailable in urban centers. However, Pemberton's construction boom and the children raised in these

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[37] Kathy Dirks, interview by Paul Anderson, Mankato, MP3, August 9, 2012.

[38] Schroeder and Beebe, *Long Range Planning*, 13.

[39] Clarice Anderson, interview, July 20, 2013.

homes appeared to be a statistical outlier in what otherwise was a depressed area. Waldorf, farther away from Mankato than Pemberton, never experienced the housing boom. Rather, it has declined with every census dating back to 1970.

The BFSRCE concluded with a recommendation that all three districts consolidate into one district. The report stated that the least viable option was for Janesville to unite solely with Waldorf-Pemberton without also bringing in St. Clair.[40] The recommendation included two unwelcomed suggestions. The first was to close the Pemberton school and second was for St. Clair to give up its high school. Janesville (St. Clair's main sports rival for decades) would seem at home to the high school. Dr. Jerry Olson, former St. Clair superintendent, voiced the heartbreak among residents of any town at the prospect of losing a high school. He said, "If you've got a high school in a small town, it's the focal point. It affects business. Business definitely goes down when a town loses its high school." [41] With closing the high school, St. Clair and Pemberton communities would lose a significant portion of their identities. Dave Marzinske, a Waldorf-Pemberton School board member, pointed out the obvious, "...everyone wants a school in their hometown. They [the residents] don't think that the town will survive if the school isn't there..."[42]

Once the BFSRCE studies were presented, pairing talks among the three districts began in earnest. While pairing talks continued, Tom West of the *Janesville*

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[40] Schroeder and Beebe, *Long Range Planning*, 39-41.

[41] Brett Pyrtle, "School Officials to Study Alternatives," *Mankato Free Press*, 9 June 1987.

[42] Dave Marzinske, interview, August 2, 2012.

Argus summed up what many thought. "...I think that deep down, every educator and school board member, possibly even every citizen, in the three districts is opposed to pairing. In each instance, we are giving up some of our independence, swallowing some of our community pride."[43]

As the 1988 meetings among the three districts dragged on it was evident that the St. Clair school board and community were unwilling to give up its school independence and greatest source of community pride. Floyd Palmer a long time resident of St. Clair and owner of many of the busses used by both the St. Clair and Waldorf-Pemberton districts recalled the meetings. "I was at a couple of the joint meetings when the Janesville School Board and the Waldorf-Pemberton School Board and the St. Clair School Board had representatives at the board meetings. You could feel the friction there. It was there." Palmer also stated that the districts of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton did not offer St. Clair either the high school or junior high "...so they [St. Clair] got up and they walked out." [44] The board eventually said that St. Clair had no desire to unite with the other two districts. Olson recalled his and the general mood of the St. Clair school board in regards to the BFSRCE's report that recommended the high school be located in Janesville, stating, "It was just like, 'Oh, so they recommended that? Thanks for doing the study.' They [the board members] were polite, but it was like—Okay. There wasn't one person who

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[43] "School Pairing: Little Choice Involved," *Janesville Argus*, 26 March 1987.

[44] Floyd Palmer, interview by Paul Anderson, North Mankato, MP3, June 4, 2013.

said we should explore this further."[45] Olson also stated that the board made it clear to him not to give up too much, not to pair with Janesville.[46] At the time, the St. Clair School Board's rejection to combine with Janesville, Waldorf, and Pemberton appeared stubborn and misguided to Olson in the face of projected enrollment trends. St. Clair had fewer than five hundred enrolled students. Furthermore, the projected enrollment was likely to be near four hundred by 1990, and the probability of passing a referendum was slim, according to BFSRCE.[47] Years later, Olson recalled the discussions over consolidating by saying, "...the hesitation of St. Clair as a district was because we were so close to Mankato and most of our people worked in Mankato...that was going in the wrong direction as far as they were concerned."[48]

PARTNER UP OR GO IT ALONE?

Pairing with Janesville, meant that St. Clair stood to lose a considerable part of its identity, namely its high school. A rival of Janesville for decades, St. Clair residents were anything but anxious to join with Janesville. Furthermore, Janesville as the larger town, would certainly hold sway when it came to any future votes. Janesville residents also wanted to pair with the Waldorf-Pemberton and St. Clair's

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[45] Jerry Olson, interview by Paul Anderson, Mankato, MP3, July 26, 2012.

[46] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2012.

[47] "MSU study: St. Clair School Faces Budget Crunch like Janesville," *Janesville Argus,* 25 March 1987.

[48] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2012.

districts rather than face the future possibility of pairing with the much larger community of Waseca.[49] Janesville School Board member, Rosalie Grams stated bluntly as the two districts of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton were considering pairing, "...it is important...to have a school with strong rural values over which the district's people would have some influence...this influence would be lost if Janesville does not pair with Waldorf Pemberton now, and is forced to join with Waseca or Mankato."[50] The loss of influence and independence by the Waldorf-Pemberton District was a given when compared with the other communities involved in consolidation talks in that the Waldorf-Pemberton District was much smaller than Janesville's District in terms of enrollment numbers.

The pairing talks gave the residents of St. Clair an opportunity to ponder what it would mean to lose a portion if not their entire school. St Clair school district has a well-established history committed to innovation and a willingness to raise local taxes for education. Unlike Waldorf, Pemberton, and Janesville, according to St. Clair's Superintendent Jerry Olson the St. Clair population included a number of residents, who were connected to Mankato State University and had settled inside the district boundaries.[51] Innovation with new technologies was nothing new to St. Clair's education history as noted in a *Mankato Free Press* article from 1969

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[49] "Study: Enrollment Drop will Create School Funding Problems Here," *Janesville Argus,* 14 January 1987.

[50] "Janesville Voter to Pair with Waldorf-Pemberton," *Janesville Argus,* 5 October 1988.

[51] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2012.

entitled, "St. Clair: Small School Innovator."[52] The article praised St. Clair for the use of what was then a new technology and educational method, having teachers tape-record books so slower reading students could follow along and improve their abilities. The BFSRCE highly praised St. Clair for the quality and upkeep of its buildings.[53] St. Clair's history as a pacesetter in technology was a key reason for hiring Olson in 1977. Unlike the other area superintendents, Olson had earned his doctorate in education as well as worked in the Florida governor's office in the Citizens Committee of Education. When asked why he took the job, Olson stated in 1976, "The people of St. Clair want a high-quality program. I want to work closely with the community to give them what they want."[54] The value of their school remaining both independent and academically on par with larger schools was woven into the community's identity. This of course meant high taxes. Olson recalled that St. Clair had higher taxes than the surrounding districts, and though he got complaints, "...it seemed that every time they supported it [school referendums]."[55] According to Olson, residents wished to have a smaller school district for their children and supported the direction of the St. Clair school.[56] This created a unique

[52] Lowell Schreyer, "St. Clair: Small School Innovator," *Mankato Free Press,* 1 October 1969.

[53] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 68-69.

[54] "Jerry Olson, 35, Named Superintendent at St. Clair," *Mankato Free Press,* 18 December 1976.

[55] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2013.

[56] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2013.

situation in St. Clair of a willingness to raise taxes in order provide an optimum education in a town of less than a thousand. As noted in the BFSRCE report, "St. Clair is well known in the region for its infusion of the computer into the school from kindergarten through grade twelve."[57] Perhaps the close proximity to Mankato, with its advancements in technology, produced a willingness in St. Clair's residents to raise taxes to retain some semblance of an equal education.

When St. Clair's voters unexpectedly by rejected a 1987 referendum, Olson warned the town of the possibility of consolidation if any future referendums failed. Olson, supported by the school board, reacted by making plans for another referendum in 1988. Wanting to press the importance of the upcoming referendum Olson conducted talks with the Mankato East School Board about possible consolidation and made sure his visit was noted by the local papers. Three hundred St. Clair residents in May 1988 toured Mankato East's high school, thinking that such a merger was a real possibility. While some welcomed the idea of pairing with Mankato, particularly many farmers who did not want to see a land-based referendum, others like Allan Schenk "feared that his four children will get lost in the shuffle."[58] St. Clair students also understood the consequences of the upcoming referendum. Then seventh-grader Dawn Schull spoke of the feelings of many after

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[57] Schroeder and Beebe, *An Analysis of the Human,* 61.

[58] Sue Menton, "300 St. Clair Residents Tour East, *Mankato Free Press,* 10 May 1988.

she toured Mankato East High, saying, "...I think I would feel lost here. It's so big."[59] Motivated by a mixture of school pride and fear of losing the local school, the townsfolk of St. Clair in a 660 to 325 vote overwhelmingly passed the $122,000 levy.[60] Consequently, St. Clair continued to determine its future. As Connie Johnson, a current St. Clair school board member stated in regard to the centrality of the school in St. Clair, "If the school goes, there's nothing left there in the town."[61] Superintendent Olson's leadership in keeping the school on the public's mind and the important role the school played in the community created a culture where its St. Clair residents vote to raise taxes in order to preserve their school.[62]

CONSOLIDATION ROAD

Formal talks between the St. Clair school board and the boards of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton officially ended on March 29, 1988. This left the school boards of Waldorf-Pemberton and Janesville to work out an agreement that would create an unsteady district according to the BFSRCE's report. Roger Groskreutz,[63] a member of the Waldorf-Pemberton school board at the time of consolidation talks

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[59] Menton, "300 St. Clair Residents Tour East," May 10, 1988.

[60] "St. Clair Voters Approve Levy; Janesville, W-P Keep Incumbents," *Janesville Argus,* 25 May 1988.

[61] Connie Johnson, interview by Paul Anderson, North Mankato, MP3, June 4, 2013.

[62] In order to retain St. Clair's independence and remain competitive with other schools, in 2000, St. Clair's residents passed a 10.5 million dollar school referendum.

[63] Roger Groskreutz, interview by Paul Anderson, Waldorf, MP3, August 1, 2012.

with Janesville and St. Clair, recalled "...it was kind of a drastic blow when St. Clair decided not to go with us, because I think that would have really helped the three communities [Janesville, Waldorf, and Pemberton].

Beyond the diminishing enrollment numbers and the outdated buildings of Waldorf and Pemberton, there were also the unfunded or partially funded state and federal mandates to consider. Over the years, state laws and court rulings began to place more stringent requirements on public facilities, which included meeting fire codes, accessibility requirements, including kitchen updates, asbestos cleanup, and provisions for special education. While one can hardly deem these as unnecessary, these mandates placed a large burden on small schools such as Janesville, Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair which already struggled to meet basic academic and facilities needs. These unfunded mandates continue to plague small schools as noted by The Executive Director of the Minnesota Rural Education Association Lee Warne. Lee spoke in 2010 in Waseca regarding the possible closing an elementary school. Lee stated,

> ...a growing list of unfunded mandates—such as No Child Left Behind and special education programs that were promised, but have yet to receive, full funding from state and federal sources—coupled with a serious state budget dilemma have created a dire situation for schools.[64]

According to Linda Born, special education had been underfunded for years.[65]

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[64] Tanner Kent, "Closing of Waldorf School Rattles Emotions," *Mankato Free Press,* 20 April 2010.

[65] Lynda Born, interview, May 24, 2013.

The question remains, if St. Clair was able to levy more taxes on its residents in order to keep its local school, why didn't the districts of Janesville and/or Waldorf-Pemberton do the same? The philosophy that had served Janesville's Superintendent Darwin Lochner and Waldorf-Pemberton Superintendent Bob Hoppe for more than sixty years combined was one of no new taxes. Beyond the financial limits of each town, both superintendents prided themselves on making due with current resources. Neither saw the sense in raising taxes to either bridge funding shortfalls or to significantly invest in building facilities. According to Dewey and Kathy Zabel (two of the facilities' custodians), Hoppe permitted the Pemberton building to fall into such disrepair that water had seeped in between the bricks and wood frame structure.[66] As a result the bricks were considered dangerously near collapse. Thus, in spite of the financial health of the district of $887.63 in reserve for each pupil, the facilities were a crumbling embarrassment.[67] Though the community and faculty saw the facilities decline both knew that little would be done. Superintendent Hoppe had neither the willingness to push for more funds nor the belief that Waldorf-Pemberton school district had a viable future. Floyd Palmer, a bus contractor with Waldorf-Pemberton school district, recalled, "We use to call him God. He ran Waldorf [-Pemberton district] with an iron fist. He was the board; he was the school; he was everything. What Bob did went; what he didn't want, didn't go. He ran the school

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[66] Dewey and Kathy Zabel, interview by Paul Anderson, Waldorf, MP3, July 21, 2012.

[67] Schroeder and Beebe, *Long Range Planning,* 13.

with an iron fist."[68] Whether the BFSRCE was correct that the Waldorf-Pemberton District had little chance of passing a referendum, with Hoppe at the helm a referendum was out of the question.

While the cost-conscious management of Hoppe left Waldorf-Pemberton in the black, Janesville began to cut its budget in 1986 with its first staff reduction in twelve years, which saved the district $29,100.[69] Enrollment declines in Janesville appeared inevitable as a 1984 survey projected that by 1989 only fifteen students would likely graduate from Janesville High.[70] Layered on top of declining enrollment, land value shrank considerably during the 1980s farm crisis. During the crisis land value dropped as much as 14.6 percent in the region.[71] The result of lack of tax revenue worried parents that shortage of funds would leave students ill prepared for college.

As demographics shifts squeezed current and projected future revenues, the Minnesota state legislature further prompted districts to consolidate by offering large single cash payments. For instance, if Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton districts would agree to consolidate the newly formed district would receive from the

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[68] Floyd Palmer, interview, June 4, 2013.

[69] "School Board Cuts One Teacher," *Janesville Argus,* 16 April 1986.

[70] "Public School Enrollment Down 8," *Janesville Argus,* 12 September 1984.

[71] "School District Land Values Down 14.6%," *Janesville Argus,* 20 August 1986.

state an additional $750,000.[72] Hoppe was so convinced of the inability of the Waldorf-Pemberton school district to avoid consolidation that he and the school board met Lockner, they also met with representatives from New Richland-Heartland, Minnesota Lake-Delavan, and Mapleton-Amboy-Good Thunder consolidated districts.[73] Bob Hoppe noted, "We [the people of Waldorf-Pemberton] don't want to be a 'mini-high school'."[74] Clearly, the day of reckoning had come.

The year 1989 would see two major events in Janesville, Waldorf, Pemberton and St. Clair. First, the Waldof-Pemberton Colts and Janesville Bears were forever retired and second, the St. Clair Indians defeated the Albrook Falcons 47-12 and with that victory won the state championship for nine-man football. The city greeted their hometown heroes with a two mile welcoming line.[75] In the course of debating the previous year's referendum, relationships among St. Clair's residents had been damaged as people argued for or against higher taxes as well as pairing with another school. Floyd Palmer, a resident of St. Clair and whose busing company has served St. Clair for decades, remembered, "That was a bitter, bitter, bitter, bitter referendum at the time. The banker in the town lost customers because he supported it...it divided the community. You know what the biggest thing [was] that

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[72] Waldorf-Pemberton Public School Public Hearing July 31, 1990. Minutes in Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton District Office.

[73] "Bus Trip to Waldorf Doesn't Take Long," *Janesville Argus,* 20 April 1988.

[74] "Joint Panel Adopts Paring Proposal for Janesville, W-P," *Janesville Argus,* 17 August 1988.

[75] "St. Clair Welcomes Home State Champs," *Janesville Argus,* 29 November 1989.

brought that community back together? In 1989 when they won the state nine-man football championship."[76] The St. Clair School when it was at its most vulnerable and in danger of losing its independence and with it the community's identity pulled off its only state championship—and saved the day.

In the next chapter, the newly formed J-W-P district discovers that consolidation does not necessarily bring better fortunes or protect it from continued enrollment declines. The earlier national battles over school desegregation, accountability and the subsequent solutions to America's supposed failing schools fully slammed into these once isolated communities.

[76] Floyd Palmer, interview, June 4, 2013.

Chapter 4

WINNERS AND LOSERS: THE COST OF COMPETITION

The American public education system has attempted to provide educational options to meet current employment trends as well as provide enlightenment for a more informed public. The school is fundamental in creating a cohesive community and yet due to its relationship to the state is subject to policy changes. The state's ability to alter public schools can and does cause sweeping changes to how a community relates to nearby towns as well as how townsfolk relate to each other. At times the education of a community's students and community identity are tied together, but, at other times personal freedom for the students and the ideal community are at odds with each other. In this chapter I examine the effects of public school open enrollment on small towns. Suffice it to say, there are communities who win while others lose in school in school consolidations and open enrollment.

Before the desegregation efforts of the 1950s, communities operated their schools with little oversight from the federal government. As shown in Chapter 2, while battles raged in urban centers over desegregation as local autonomy was constrained by the orders of federal courts, rural communities, due to their relatively

homogeneous makeup and distance from any substantial minority populations, remained isolated from the turmoil of federal and state equality efforts. But at the same time as shown in chapter one, rural communities, although at a financial disadvantage with smaller tax bases, attempt to provide an education on par with schools in larger communities. Nonetheless, equality measures for rural schools were based largely on voluntary commitments of funds, land, and supplies rather than on state resources.

In the 1970s, busing mandates met stiff resistance as neighborhoods sensed losing the ability to control community schools. The rationale for racial integration of schools was based on the principle of providing educational equality for children regardless of level of affluence. Additionally, a better educated society and integrated education would hopefully create a more harmonious and prosperous society. An unintended consequence, however, of forced integration efforts, was a backlash among communities as student bodies were broken up. Examples of communities rife with discord due to school busing mandates are found throughout the nation. As previously noted there were protests in Boston, but Boston's protests were not isolated. Public marches in disagreement over busing mandates broke out in North Carolina, Tennessee, Michigan, Kentucky, and other states. In 1975 citizens of Louisville, Kentucky took to the streets to demonstrate their anger at the mandated busing program. Eventually, violence rose to such a level that in order to protect bus riders, Governor Julian Carroll called in 1,800 National Guard members.

All this while city police used tear gas to break up crowds numbering often in the hundreds and at times in the thousands.[1] Clearly many people sought to undo changes they viewed as unwelcome intrusions into their communities.

Figure 2

1975 Protesters in Louisville, Kentucky

A NATION AT RISK

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a noticeable shift occurred. Taking the opposite approach of boosting education through integration, the Reagan administration focused on the individual student reaching his/her full potential through school competition. While progressives focused on bettering society and the individual's ability to rise above poverty, Reagan, backed by laissez faire libertarians, sought to strip power from what they saw as overbearing teachers' unions and district boundaries. While holding different ideals, a common ground between

[1] David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70's, The Decade that Brought You Modern Life (for better or worse)* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 254.

progressives and libertarians was discovered. The focus was on an *individual's* education, and that in turn set the stage for open enrollment. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that both libertarians and progressives were willing to achieve their goals in spite of the consequences for neighborhood schools.

Recalling my childhood, the school stands out for me as the public gathering spot for a host of events. Throughout the year, the school building swirled with activity as neighbors attended celebrations, sporting events, club meetings, and later computer classes. No other institution was or is as equipped as the neighborhood school to bring together people of different ages, classes, and religious groups for the common good of a community. As Duane Hoffman of Pemberton stated, "The school itself was the center of the city and the community...the building also served as a community center, of course."[2] Yet the emphasis on the individual in America's educational system has impacted communities. No policy had a greater impact on small towns in Minnesota and later elsewhere across the nation as open enrollment.

Open enrollment policies are as diverse as the states in which they are written. Each legislature creates the limits of its state's open enrollment policy.[3] Regardless of the variety the universal starting point for open enrollment is, "the voluntary enrollment of a student in a public school other than the one assigned on

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[2] Duane Hoffman, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 14, 2013.

[3] For a recent list of each state's enrollment policies see Peter, W Crookston, *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 139-152.

the basis of residence"[4] Before the Minnesota Open Enrollment Law, children in small towns were largely confined to the district of their residency. To attend another school outside of a student's district, the student was required to receive permission from both the district he/she was hoping to attend as well as from the district that he/she was leaving. Transportation costs for a student leaving the district were the student's responsibility. In Minnesota districts were reluctant to allow students to leave because the famed "Minnesota Miracle" attached state funds to each pupil. Thus, the district school that the student attended was ultimately the recipient of his/her education funds. The loss of a single student to another district meant a shift of tens of thousands of dollars over a student's K-12 education. After the Minnesota Open Enrollment Law, districts competed against each other as families shopped around for what they saw was the best district for their children. As in the world of sports, the competition for pupils resulted in winners and losers.

The notion that schools ought to compete without any semblance of district boundaries dates back to Milton and Rose Friedman and their idea of parental vouchers as expressed in their 1962 article "The Role of Government in Education."[5] Under their plan, families would be able to choose any public or private school. Boundaries that helped to establish and hold communities together were rendered obsolete. As previously noted, Milton and Rose Friedmans libertarian voucher idea

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[4] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/open%20enrollment, accessed 05/28/2012.

[5] Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/The-Role-of-Government-in-Education.aspx.

for low performing students was largely ignored in the 1960s and 1970s. But his idea would be resurrected under Ronald Reagan. School vouchers had a friend in the White House. Reagan made Friedman an advisor and later in 1988 awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Yet, with a United States Congress controlled by Democrats, Reagan's support of vouchers, which could potentially fund private schools with public dollars, stood nearly no chance of passage.[6]

The history of American education has not been immune to the forces of fear. And, fear can motivate people to take action. For example, some feared that minority children would not receive a proper education except through the desegregation of schools with predominantly white children. Others feared that whites and blacks going to school together would create problems in racial mixing. Communities feared the loss of the dynamics of their community school as their children were bussed elsewhere. In 1983, President Reagan drummed up national fear with the alarmist report, "A "Nation at Risk"." The report, laced with cold war rhetoric, painted a bleak picture of America's education system:

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war...We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

The report continues with an assessment of global competition:

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[6] Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic, 2010), 117.

> The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.[7]

Although the report is not an outright endorsement of competition among schools, nevertheless, it is clear that Reagan's philosophy leaves little doubt about the direction he and his advisors wished to steer American education. Not since the fear over the Soviet's launch of Sputnik a quarter of a century earlier had America felt so inferior and, as in 1957, the blame fell on what was perceived to be an inept educational system. "Nation at Risk" said nothing about the importance of neighborhood schools and the loyalty needed to build stronger communities. Rather, as in the era of Progressives, the report demanded that the emphasis of education must be on individual achievement instead of making a more equitable society.

> Our [America's] goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities.[8]

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[7] "A Nation at Risk," United States Department of Education, accessed July 8, 2014, http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.

[8] "A Nation at Risk." United States Department of Education, accessed July 7, 2014, http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.

David Berliner and Bruce Biddle argue in *The Manufactured Crisis* that Reagan, and the administrations that followed him, pushed an old nineteenth century education model that stressed "Human Capital" as it viewed students as investments for a future economy. As noted the 19th century schools focused on practical and hands-on education so that individuals could meet market demands of that day. For the twentieth century and beyond, subjects that were likely to see the highest return in the areas of science and mathematics were stressed.[9] Berliner and Biddle go further to argue that Republicans made public education the scapegoat for the nation's financial slowdown in the 1970s and 80s.[10] The Republican answer to America's economic woes was to decentralize the education system in the mold of Friedman while demanding the inclusion of more courses promising a brighter economic future, with an emphasis on human capital. This led to educational policies that resulted in school choice and later standardized testing, which in turn added pressures on districts for making the most of their "human capital". Districts were pressured by the prospect of students deciding to leave their neighborhood school for another school unless offered an increased number of specialized courses. The public school was now immersed in the marketplace philosophy where the strong survive and the weak either improve or die. Some, like Edwin West, an advocate for school competition argue:

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[9] Berliner and Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis*, 141-142.

[10] Berliner and Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis*, 157.

> if competition is to mean anything, it must be allowed to drive inefficient uses of resources from the marketplace by allowing more efficient alternatives to enter. To the citizen taxpayer the main end is the provision of the best service for every dollar spent, not the maintenance in perpetuity of one particular means to that end.[11]

Open enrollment created an paradigm whereby a district's ability to navigate the marketplace would determine its success or demise.

RAMIFICATION OF STATE POLICY

The pressure to compete and to meet the anticipated demands of parents were primary reasons for the school districts of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton to consolidate. Bob Hoppe, superintendent of Waldorf-Pemberton School District, stated, "One of the factors in the J-W-P talks was the fact that we better meet the competition or else open enrollment could affect us negatively. So we'll just get together here and we will have more offerings."[12] Preparation was made by districts throughout the area as the days of open enrollment drew near. No matter the preparation, Minnesota school districts entered into a Darwinian struggle whereby schools competed and tore at each other for enrollment numbers, state dollars, and community survival. Apt and savvy districts like St. Clair circled around their region seeking to save their own school at the expense of neighboring districts. Within a handful of years after the consolidation of Janesville, Waldorf, and Pemberton, the

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[11] Edwin G. West, "Open Enrollment: A Vehicle for Market Competition in Schooling?", *Cato Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1989): 257.

[12] Bob Hoppe, interview, August 1, 2012.

school buildings in Pemberton and Waldorf had become vacant carcasses. The students that would have walked their halls were carted away to other area schools. As Connie Johnson, a current school board member of St. Clair and Palmer Bus Service driver, put it,

> Yes, I've started picking up some kids [in Waldorf]. We've got three families in Waldorf that we pick up. The Janesville bus is over there, the New Richland bus is over there, and I'm over there. And I think the New Richland bus probably downloads as many off their buses as what Janesville does...You're just passing buses all over the place, where years ago, this is your community and this is ours.[13]

The seeds of competition found fertile soil in Minnesota through an unlikely politician, Democrat Rudy Perpich. Perpich, whose origins were in Minnesota's small town-dotted Iron Range, won election to the Minnesota Senate in 1962. Upon moving to the Twin Cities metro area he neglected to consider the neighborhood school. The Perpich family discovered, after they had moved into their new home, hat they preferred another school in a nearby district, but they were prevented from sending their children to the school of their choice. This left an indelible mark on Perpich, whose language in a *New York Times* piece was reminiscent of Friedman:

> The public school system is autonomous and answerable to virtually no one. Large, hidebound bureaucracies administer school districts of many cities, and often are too removed from the reality of the schoolroom to address the basic problems.[14]

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[13] Connie Johnson, interview, June 4, 2013.

[14] Rudy Perpich, "Choose Your School," *The New York Times*, assessed July 7, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/06/opinion/choose-your-school.html.

When Perpich became governor for the second time in 1982, (Perpich had served his last term from 1976-1979), he used *A* "Nation at Risk" as a tool to pressure lawmakers to offer greater school choice. Perpich's first attempt at open enrollment was in 1985 with what he referred to as "Access to Excellence". With strong opposition from the teacher unions, the open enrollment portion failed, but another option was opened. Called postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO), Minnesota was the first state to allow eleventh and twelfth grade students to attend college paid for by the state. Thus students in the PSEO program would earn both high school and college credits.[15] PSEO's first year saw more than five thousand students enroll in college.[16] PSEO's affected communities as students transferred out of schools like St. Clair into one of Mankato's colleges such as Bethany Lutheran College and Minnesota State University. High schools faced budget shortfalls and also had difficulty filling athletic rosters, which in turn hurt the town's unity. In recent years, St. Clair has been unable to field a football team, the very sport that helped in 1989 bring the community together after a contentious referendum vote. As Mike Muedeking, a current resident of St. Clair and former principal, teacher, and coach at Waldorf and Janesville stated in regard to PSEO students, "They're not coming back [to town]. You lose that loyalty...If you're going there in the afternoon and taking 3 classes, you aren't coming back for football practice or volleyball practice or

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[15] Ember Reichgott Junge, *Zero Changes of Passage: The Pioneering Charter School Story*, (Edina, M.N.: Beaver Pond Press, 2012), 27.

[16] Junge, *Zero Changes of Passage,* 29.

whatever. And that may not be a big deal [to them], but it is [for the community].[17] PSEO was only the first in a line of innovative ideas put forth by Perpich that expanded school choice to later include open enrollment and charter schools.

Yet the impact of PSEO on rural schools is limited to the few communities within driving distance of a college or university. Similarly, competition from charter schools is primarily found in urban areas and thus has less impact on rural communities and their schools. But, the effects of open enrollment on small towns are clearly evident. It is important to remember that open enrollment developed in two stages. The first stage began in 1987, when it was signed into law by Perpich. Open enrollment then was simply an option given to and decided by each school district. As meetings regarding possible consolidation were beginning between the communities of Janesville, Waldorf, Pemberton, and St. Clair, the open enrollment option was before each school board. Janesville and St. Clair voted to allow open enrollment, while the Waldorf-Pemberton district rejected the option. Waldorf-Pemberton, as the smallest of the three districts, had the most to lose with open enrollment. Having only a handful of students leave could jeopardize the survival of the district. Years later Hoppe stated, "I was opposed to it to start with and I'm opposed to it today."[18] Mudeking offered the parents' perspective on open enrollment when he said, "...as a parent, I'm selfish. I want my kid to get the best

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[17] Mike Mudeking, interview, August 9, 2012.

[18] Bob Hoppe, interview, August 1, 2012.

and get everything I want him to have and if he wasn't going to get it where he was, I want him to go where he can..."[19] Just as Perpich had wanted another option for his family when he moved to the Twin Cities area, so others wanted the same and welcomed the individualized attention open enrollment would supposedly bring.

In order to make universal open enrollment in public schools a reality another hurdle had to be jumped. The second stage in Perpich's open enrollment vision made it possible for all kindergarten through twelfth grade students to attend public schools of their choosing. To pass this mandatory change to Minnesota's public education, the language was buried in the Education Omnibus Bill of 1988. According to Ember Reichgott Junge, a Democrat Farmer-Labor state senator from the Iron Range, a secret deal was reached which allowed passage of the bill making open enrollment mandatory among all Minnesota public schools.[20] For school districts with a thousand or more students the law would take effect at the start of the 1989-1990 school year. The following year all schools, regardless of size, were required to allow their students to open enroll.[21] Minnesota was the first state to have a comprehensive and mandatory open enrollment policy for all of its public schools. As

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[19] Mike Mudeking, interview, August 9, 2012.

[20] Junge, *Zero Changes of Passage,* 31.

[21] Susan Urahn, *Open Enrollment Study: Student and District Participation 1989-90* (St. Paul, MN: Research Department, Minnesota House of Representatives, 1990), 3.

of 2013, sixteen other states have followed Minnesota's lead, requiring open enrollment among all public schools.[22]

The first year of open enrollment's mandatory compliance saw less than one percent of Minnesota students utilize the option.[23] Initially St. Clair and Waldorf-Pemberton appeared to be the big losers of students in the region as each lost thirteen students to neighboring districts. Janesville's district, on the other hand, lost only one student to open enrollment. Larger area school districts like Waseca gained nearly thirty students and were the big winners. At the time, Hoppe stated, "I don't expect too many more (changes)."[24] Hoppe's hope of future stability for the Waldorf and Pemberton schools proved to be short-sighted. Hoppe and Lockner were at or near retirement. Both agreed to vacate their offices in order for a new superintendent to take over.

A NEW MORNING WITH NEW PROBLEMS

Hired as Janesville, Waldof, Pemberton's (J-W-P's) new superintendent in 1991, Donald Wilke was unlike either of his predecessors. Lochner and Hoppe both had long histories in their communities and knew the backgrounds of nearly every

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[22] Education Commission on the States, "Open Enrollment: Online Database," Last modified 2014. Accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.ecs.org/html/educationissues/OpenEnrollment/OEDB_intro.asp.

[23] Education Commission on the States, 9.

[24] "Janesville May Lose Up to 1, W-P 13 to Open Enrollment," *Janesville Argus*, 11 January 1989.

person in their districts. Wilke was, by all accounts, an outsider whose style was non-confrontational and left decisions to be made by committees. His leadership was completely different from that of his predecessors who oversaw every detail of their schools. Mudeking, former principal and teacher at Waldorf, suspects that Wilke was hired because many faculty and staff members had grown tired of Lochner and Hoppe's ways and sought more input in the school's affairs.[25] On a positive note, it seemed to the staff that as an outsider, Wilke would be impartial towards the three communities. Nevertheless, he found it difficult to connect with those who held sway in the community. Born, who worked alongside Wilke in the district office stated, "Either one [Lockner or Hoppe] would have had a sense of the climate, the feel, the people - who you needed to talk to, who you needed to convince, who you needed to make the points with, that sort of thing."[26] Not only was Wilke new to the community, but also was dumbfounded as to what was expected of him. In frustration over the district's expectations, he said,

> Excuse me, every place I've been, the head custodian took care of custodial, the principal took care of principal, and my job was to work with board, community, etc. but I wasn't into that sort of micro-managing. The same thing the secretary said to me, 'Well, Mr. Lochner picked up the mail and he got his mail in the school mailbox and then he would just go every day and pick up the mail at the post office.' I'm thinking, you know, the district thinks I'm paid too much already and yes, I'm paid too much to pick up the mail or toilet paper.[27]

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[25] Mike Mudeking, interview, August 9, 2012.

[26] Lynda Born, interview, May 24, 2013.

[27] Don Wilke, interview by Paul Anderson, St. Cloud, MP3, May 29, 2012.

Wilke also had the difficult task of uniting three communities into one identity. The creation of a single identity proved to be a task that Wilke was not up to. After five years Wilke's contract was not renewed by the district board. Palmer, of Palmer bus service that provides bus services for the J-W-P district, simply stated about Wilkes' quick exodus, "...if Jesus Christ would have come, they would have gotten rid of him too."[28] Wilke's time, while short, was pivotal in directing the district through this early period of open enrollment, with budget shortfalls and a public uncertain about the district's future.

Prior to Wilke's arrival, attempts to bring the communities together under a shared identity had been made by the previous administrations. Such items as the new school's mascot, song, and colors were voted on by the communities and students in the hopes of establishing a shared identity. In order to create a balance between the larger student body of Janesville and that of Waldorf and Pemberton, student votes from the small towns were weighted 1.7 to every Janesville vote.[29] As a result of the vote, new school colors were selected that were unique to J-W-P. Likewise the mascot was neither a bear nor a colt, but a bulldog. Other attempts to bring unity and promote loyalty included open houses at Janesville and Waldorf. School busses transported people to see the other's facilities.[30] There was no open house for Pemberton. Letters to the editor of the *Janesville Argus* (a paper to which

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[28] Floyd Palmer, interview, June 4, 2013.

[29] "St. Clair having big year athletically," *Janesville Argus,* 1 March 1989.

[30] "W-P, Janesville School Open Houses Next Week," *Janesville Argus,* 6 April 1988.

few people from Pemberton and Waldorf subscribed) urged Janesville residents to welcome the students of Waldorf and Pemberton. Hence, some Janesville residents recognized the difficulties students might have in moving to a new school.[31] An op-ed piece printed in the October 5, 1988 *Janesville Argus* noted:

> A once in a lifetime opportunity is before us. We have a chance not only to create a new school, but also to create a new community around that school as well. Many of us will be making new friends and acquaintances during the coming months. It is important that both districts welcome each other; the education of our children is at stake...as long as we are willing to cooperate, we can make the pairing work...Together, our two communities can create the best school in southern Minnesota.[32]

What the writer of the op-ed statement failed to consider was the strength of old school loyalties and the sense that the new district could not provide the same sense of community. Additionally, it was not two communities that were combining, but three, each with its unique history. At high school events it was still common to see dozens of Golden Bears letterman jackets, shirts, and symbols that served to remind Janesville people of their past and at the same time remind Waldorf and Pemberton residents that they were more like visitors than partners. Darrell Schubbe stated,

> We probably don't have any more kids at a basketball game in the winter than we had 50 years ago. Because people don't go. You don't know the neighboring kids. You don't know the parents too well. It was a local gathering really when you went. This whole [Pemberton] gym over here would be plumb full when there was a ball game. They

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[31] "A Once-in-a- Lifetime Opportunity," *Janesville Argus,* 5 October 1988.

[32] "A Once-in-a- Lifetime Opportunity," *Janesville Argus,* 5 October 1988.

> don't have any more than that in Janesville now with three times the students. You kind of lose interest.[33]

With the eventual consolidation of the two districts, it did not take long for the residents of Pemberton and Waldorf to begin to lose interest in J-W-P events. Any attempts at bringing the communities together was just as short lived as keeping all the local schools open.

It quickly became evident to residents in Waldorf and Pemberton that the two districts that formed J-W-P were anything but equal partners. Before the two districts united into a single district, the two districts worked out an activity schedule whereby varsity games were shared between the two schools. For instance, boys' and girls' varsity basketball games were occasionally played at the Pemberton Gymnasium. Once pairing and then full consolidation occurred between Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton, all such sharing of activities ended and there was a steady decline in interaction from 1990-1995 among people from the three communities. Mudeking stated that such sharing of sports activities became impossible as the size and facilities required to host such events were not available in Pemberton or Waldorf. When asked by a Waldorf resident why football games were no longer played at Waldorf, Mudeking shot back with, "Have you even been to a [J-W-P football] game? He said, 'no.' Well, come to a game in Janesville and then come back

[33] Darrell Schubbe, interview, June 14, 2013.

here to Waldorf and look at the facility."[34] In other words, the size of the consolidated school not only prevented sharing, but also people who likely would have attended a W-P game were no longer connecting in the same way. For a number of years, the Pemberton school's gymnasium was rented out by the St. Clair School due to St. Clair's lack of floor space. St. Clair's presence was more noticeable in Pemberton than that of J-W-P, which resulted in further threatening any bonds of loyalty between the Pemberton community and the J-W-P School District.

Initially as another means to ease the uncertainty with regard to the future of each community's school, an agreement was made whereby, "No school buildings will be closed for the next five years commencing July 1, 1990."[35] Unfortunately and inexplicably, this agreement was not made known to Wilke when he arrived. In his first months in office he offered a number of cost saving ventures, including the possible closure of Pemberton's school building. Allan Lynch, who was on the school board at the time, recalled that the board had asked Wilke to come up with ideas and "...the board left him hung out with that idea that it was what he wanted to do."[36] None on the board said anything to Wilke about the prior agreement to keep all of the schools open for at least five years. The idea created a firestorm within Pemberton as community members were furious with Wilke at his proposal to close

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[34] Mike Mudeking, interview, August 9, 2012.

[35] Waldorf-Pemberton Public Schools Cooperation and Combination Public Hearings July 1, 1990. Courtesy of the Janesville, Waldorf, Pemberton School District Office.

[36] Alan Lynch, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 2, 2012.

their school. Darwin Lochner, the former Janesville superintendent, recalled how he received many telephone calls from irate people reminding him of the deal. He subsequently visited Wilke and informed him of the agreement.[37] While the suggestion was quickly shelved, it nevertheless made many people leery of the district and Wilke's future plans. The trust between the public and Wilke had been damaged. Some in the Pemberton community organized monthly breakfasts and took donations to help keep the school open.[38] Yet, it was going to take more than pancakes and sausages to save the Pemberton school.

MOST LIKELY YOU GO YOUR WAY AND I'LL GO MINE

The difficulties of open enrollment, pending budget shortfalls, and the population difference between the towns made the transition from two districts into one anything but streamlined. Janesville's population was nearly ten times the size of either Pemberton or Waldorf. Cal Bjornson, a former J-W-P school board member and lifelong resident of Pemberton stated, "...unless the [consolidating] communities are approximately the same size, the feeling there becomes bitterness because the feeling starts to creep in that someone is controlling [the district]."[39] In the coming years, the sway of Janesville's voters was felt as referendums, bonds, and the future

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[37] Darwin Lochner, interview by Paul Anderson, Janesville, MP3, June 26, 2013.

[38] Sheila Jamieson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 8, 2012.

[39] Cal Bjornson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, July 21, 2012.

of the district's buildings was squarely in the hands of Janesville's voters and school board members who were increasingly made up of Janesville residents.

The obstacles in forming bonds between the three communities were immense. Recalling his time at J-W-P, Wilke said that taking the job of superintendent was a mistake.[40] Creating loyalty to the district in the three towns was a difficult and complex task. However, although stretched, loyalty among many families remained toward the newly founded J-W-P district as long as each community retained its local school. Despite the open enrollment option and the lure of a closer St. Clair school, the vast majority of Pemberton students continued to attend the district schools. The school districts' agreement that agreed that Janesville would retain both its high school and grade school students. The Waldorf school building housed the 6th-8th graders, while Pemberton's building retained Waldorf and Pemberton grade school students. To make matters more complicated, some Janesville families did not want their children to travel to the junior high school in Waldorf and opted to enroll them in the local Trinity Lutheran School, which operated a kindergarten through eighth grade school next to the Janesville building. To make their school more enticing to families, in 1986 Trinity began to charge no tuition, even for non-church members. Trinity Lutheran School had in late 1980s about fifteen students per class.[41] Thus the Janesville public school district that

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[40] Don Wilke, interview, May 29, 2013.

[41] "Trinity Adopts Free-Tuition Enrollment," *Janesville Argus,* 6 May 1986.

already struggled with enrollment numbers would face not only competition with other area public schools but also with an adjacent free private school.

Along with school boards around the state dealing with the new dynamics of competition, the schools of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton had attempted to create new course offerings to attract area students. While under Lochner and Hoppe's jurisdiction, the schools began by providing new curriculum options aided by $750,000 given by the state as an incentive to consolidate.[42] To the newly hired Don Wilke, the previous administrations plans to create new classes and hire new teachers was foolhardy because within a few years the money was spent, the classes were cancelled, and the district was forced to fire staff. Wilke maintains that the funds ought to have been used for one time expenditures such as fixing up buildings that in his mind were in poor structural condition.[43] Others, like former Janesville superintendent Lochner stated that, "...if students are going to have a background that is competitive...the school must have the curriculum to back them up...I look at it [the pairing] as being an excellent opportunity to offer students a strong curriculum."[44] How the state money should be used in the face of open enrollment became another obstacle to uniting communities. Clearly open enrollment and the competition with other districts made schools act and react in ways that they might have otherwise done differently. The choice to put funds in curriculum offerings

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[42] Janesville School Board Minutes. July 9, 1990. Attachment F.

[43] Don Wilke, interview, May 29, 2013.

[44] "Here Comes the J-W-P Bulldogs," *Janesville Argus,* 16 August 1989.

rather than infrastructure maintenance left the Pemberton building, as well as the other buildings, inadequately maintained, especially the 1920 portion of Pemberton's building, which appeared dangerously close to collapse. So dangerous was the situation that a catch fence was installed in the event bricks fell from the building's exterior.

The J-W-P School District asked the voters in November 1992 for an additional $525,000 a year for the next five years. The money was needed to maintain the current course offerings and for upkeep of the buildings. Of note, the 1992 referendum was aided by the general election and saw a big turnout. More than 2,400 district residents voted. The referendum passed by a razor thin margin of a mere twenty-seven votes, which showed the lack of unity in the district. To make matters worse for the district, a state loophole allowed the recall and ultimate negation of the 1992 referendum. In 1993 the voters of the district decided to cancel the funds the school was expecting by a vote of 986 to 760. Voter turnout 1993 was half of that from 1992. Those who voted were likely to be strongly engaged in supporting or defeating the previous referendum. With this broadside attack by opponents of raising taxes, the district went back to the voters in 1994 with a more modest referendum of $324,450 per year for three years. This time the purpose was solely to cover shortfalls to the general fund's balance. The district's population again voted down the referendum by seventy-seven votes. Those in Pemberton voted fifty-five to forty-two in favor of the additional funds, but Wilke and the school

board were unable to convince enough of the rest of the district's people that additional money was really needed. Meanwhile, the Pemberton building was breaking down and sadly the failure of the 1994 referendum sealed its fate.[45]

The ultimate test of loyalty to the new district for the people of Pemberton came in 1994 when the J-W-P School Board voted to close the Pemberton building after the 1994-1995 school year. According to Dave Marzinske, closing the Pemberton building had been in Wilke's mind all along.[46] Ultimately the school board agreed with Wilke and unanimously voted to close the Pemberton building when the 5-year stay of closure expired. Another who blamed the board and Wilke was the former Superintendent of Waldorf-Pemberton Bob Hoppe, who was instrumental in the formation of J-W-P.

Hoppe said:

> I was just dumbfounded when they did that. I could not believe they would jeopardize the merger by closing down a school in a community that was just two or three years prior to that in with the discussion of how we can best serve the educational needs of the kids of Pemberton, Waldorf, and Janesville. All of a sudden close a school? Of the most vulnerable areas that you stood of possibly closing, a blind man could tell Pemberton [residents] would be the first [to opt for open enrollment out of the district] because of its location.[47]

After the decision to close the Pemberton School was made, Pemberton community members began to point fingers as to who was to blame for the school's

[45] All referendum statistics courtesy of the Janesville, Waldorf, Pemberton School District Office.

[46] Dave Marzinske, interview, August 8, 2012.

[47] Bob Hoppe, interview, August1, 2012.

closing. Alan Lynch, a former school board member at J-W-P, currently residing on a farm south of Pemberton, refutes Hoppe's assessment by saying that the district was not at fault for Pemberton's closing. He believes that the true blame for its closure lies at the feet of Pemberton's residents. Lynch noted that some parents prior to the building closing had contacted the St. Clair school's office in regards to open enrollment even though the district had made some capital investments in the school, including a new heating system and an updated cafeteria. According to Lynch, months before the decision to close the Pemberton school, some residents in Pemberton were comparing the facilities at Pemberton with those at St. Clair and liked what they saw in St. Clair better.[48] St. Clair's contacts with Pemberton residents were verified by Palmer, a school bus service owner who was contracted by both districts. Palmer stated that he accompanied a St. Clair staff member to provide information to parents in Pemberton about how to enroll their children in St. Clair and what St. Clair could provide in terms of transportation.[49] Others like Chuck and Sue Geariety traveled seven miles on Highway 83 to tour the building, because in their opinion the school was going to be soon closed.[50] With the attraction of St. Clair and growing budget shortfalls, the J-W-P school board felt it had no choice, but to close the school. Anger erupted in meetings held in Pemberton regarding closing the school. Lynch recalled people up in arms that the school board was considering

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[48] Alan Lynch, interview, August 2, 2012.

[49] Floyd Palmer, interview, June 4, 2013.

[50] Chuck Geariety interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 4, 2012.

the closure of the building. Lynch stated that he spoke with one person after the meeting who called him a damn communist.[51] Rhetoric and labels from the cold war of us vs. them had reared its ugly head in America's heartland.

THROW IT ALL AWAY

Others in Pemberton, instead of turning against the J-W-P School Board, blamed fellow community members. Doug Baer, the current mayor of Pemberton, recalled that the J-W-P district needed $80,000 or the Pemberton building was going to close and remembered how a few individuals (and one in particular) cost the community its school when he said,

> That's just what it is—$80,000. So she [Shelia Jamison] gets a group together because she doesn't want to pay higher taxes. So she fights it. Then all of a sudden, 'If I don't get my way here, I'm going to send my kids to St. Clair.' It's just like a bunch of kids, maneuvering around for $80,000 - cheap! ... She thought it was pretty smart to sit up there [the local tavern] when the farmers would come in and say, 'Well, I said this [or that].' That's what it cost us. The stubbornness of a handful. That's the way it always is...That's exactly how it happened and it's pathetic."[52]

He also stated in a similar fashion, "If that five or six people would have kept their mouths shut and got away from that game-type atmosphere, probably the $80,000 referendum would have gone through and the school would be open yet."[53] For about a year, Baer said he stopped going up to Jamie's Pub, the town's only tavern,

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[51] Allan Lynch, interview, August 2, 2012.

[52] Doug Baer, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 30, 2012.

[53] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

which was subsequently owned by Jamison and her husband. Another rift was mentioned by Clarice Anderson, a long time teacher and resident of Pemberton. She recalled cool relationships with neighbors for many years due to their decision to open enroll their children out of the district. Another long time teacher at Pemberton, Gloria Hoppe relayed her feelings when students opted for St. Clair, "I really felt bad. I really felt disappointed in the Pemberton community and how they pulled against it [J-W-P District]...I felt really - almost angry, these students you get so used to."[54] Kathy Dierks, another long-time Pemberton teacher, expressed her feelings when she said, "I was very disappointed at the people who open enrolled and left the district...I felt there wasn't any loyalty to us...and that hurt."[55] The friendships that had taken decades to create between the teaching staff of the Pemberton school and its community were in many cases shattered.

It seems, according to many of the teachers and community leaders, that many in the district had forsaken the responsibility to keep up the maintenance of the Pemberton school building. The building was more than a collection of classrooms. The building was a community center which welcomed volunteers and provided services well beyond school hours. After-school activities such as sports, art shows, theater and band performances, town projects, clubs, meetings, dances, and a host of other events kept buildings buzzing with activity long after school

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[54] Gloria Hoppe, interview by Paul Anderson, St. Clair, MP3, August 10, 2012.

[55] Kathy Dierks, interview by Paul Anderson, Mankato, MP3, August 9, 2012.

hours. No other place in town could take the place of the schoolhouse. As Professor Robert Wuthnow of the University of California Berkley wrote of the importance schools to small towns:

> In town after town, the high school was the largest, newest, and best-maintained public building. In other communities, an elementary school occupied a similar place. Like the one-room country school for an earlier generation, these were the centers of social life in their communities. People came there to visit their children's and grandchildren's teachers, to attend concerts and school plays, and to vote. They gathered there for blood drives, vaccinations, and family reunions, and they flocked in large numbers to root for the home team[56]

Wilke, the school board, and the school staff felt that while closing the building might mean the loss of a few Pemberton students, they certainly were not prepared for what happened next. Nearly all of Pemberton's students open enrolled in St. Clair for the 1995-1996 school year, which meant eighty plus students left their former district. A district that had in many cases served children's parents and grandparents was no longer their district. In the 1995-1996 school year, more than $4000 per student left the J-W-P district for St. Clair.[57] In retrospect, Wilke admitted the mistake when he stated, "The sad part of that is that people opted for open enrollment so we thought we might save some dollars for the district [by closing Pemberton's school]. We didn't end up saving any dollars..."[58] Perry Mortenson, who after the closing of Pemberton's school open enrolled his son in St. Clair stated,

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[56] Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 124.

[57] West, "Open Enrollment," 253.

[58] Don Wilke, interview, May 29, 2013.

"They [the school board] didn't think people would do it." [59] Pemberton's residents, instead of raising the $80,000 required to keep the building open, have instead, through the years, sent millions of dollars of funding down Highway Eighty-three as each bus loaded with Pemberton kids journeyed to St. Clair. The loss to the J-W-P District and the community of Pemberton seems tremendous for most, while others like Dave Marzinske and Cal Bjornson take a pragmatic approach and realize that "...what was can't be forever".[60] The hurt expressed in Pemberton was later shared by many in Waldorf. In 2010, the J-W-P school board elected to close Waldorf's school. Sue Kipp a long time resident of Waldorf stated,

> You lose connection completely with the school district because now there's no kids around basically and so you lose contact with what's happening at the [district] school. So there is that sense of loss. I think it's a huge sense of loss...you understand a little better what Pemberton went through.[61]

The J-W-P district is not the only district to face budget shortfalls due to open enrollment because, as noted above, sixteen other states have adopted open enrollment policies. Thus the effects of open enrollment and school competition are felt across much of the nation. Nor are the effects limited to small towns. For instance, in the Ohio towns of Hamilton (population 62,000) and Middletown (population 48,000) the net financial losses for 2011 were $52,000 and $1,500,000

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[59] Perry Mortensen, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 31, 2012.

[60] Cal Bjornson, interview, July 21, 2012.

[61] Sue Kipp, interview, July 20, 2012.

respectively due to students opting to leave their residential school district.[62] Madison, Wisconsin in a 2010 state journal report cited that the district was hit hard by open enrollment during the 2009-2010 school year at a cost of $2.5 million.[63] These and other districts and their community members who remain loyal to the neighborhood schools are left struggling to compete the following year lest more student are lost to open enrollment.

In 1928, the business community of Pemberton raised funds in order to construct a power line from Janesville to Pemberton.[64] As the electricity flowed from Janesville, it provided Pemberton's businesses, homes, and school with power and seemingly made Pemberton's future brighter. Sixty-seven years later the business community was negatively affected by the decision reached by the J-W-P School Board that saw the lights out in the Pemberton School. According to Char Quiram, a former Pemberton postal worker, Pemberton's school accounted for about half of the mail generated by the town.[65] Although there was a loss of many events after the consolidation with Janesville, Pemberton still had an active music and theater program. The economic impact on Pemberton's local businesses was also felt as

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[62] Richard Jones, "Open Enrollment Hurts Some Schools in Funding," *News, information & entertainment for Oxford, Butler County &...*, accessed July 8, 2014, http://www.oxfordpress.com/news/news/local/open-enrollment-hurts-some-schools-in-funding/nNYd6/.

[63] "Madison, Hit Hard by Open Enrollment, May Lobby to Change Law," *Wisconsin State Journal,* September 13, 2000, http://host.madison.com/news/local/education/local_schools/madison-hit-hard-by-open-enrollment-may-lobby-to-change/article_ea251524-beee-11df-8e64-001cc4c03286.html#ixzz2ZEtkfQzE. September 13, 2010.

[64] Eugene Holmes, *Waldorf-Pemberton: Memories of Fifty Years* (Waldorf, MN, 1970), 55.

[65] Shar Quiram, interview, June 14, 2013.

fewer people stopped for gas, car repairs, and food than they once did when school functions were common. Gerald Hofman, Pemberton's auto and tractor mechanic stated that he had a slight downturn in business as people who once worked at the Pemberton school were no longer patrons of his shop. Likewise, he would on occasion do bus maintenance and that ended with the closure of the school. Hofman stated, "It [closing the school] kind of takes away from the local community. I don't think there's any question about that. Actually, they're moving a lot of money outside the local community." [66] Sue Kipp, the Pemberton school's long time secretary, admitted that when her position was transferred to Janesville, she no longer took her car to Hofman for oil changes and other repairs.[67] Doug Bear stated, "What people don't realize are the vendors....All of a sudden you lose a big source like the school closing and all of a sudden that vendor won't come out here for Jim Bey (proprietor of Pemberton Motor Mart) because he doesn't buy enough." The school touched the entire community in ways not consciously recognized until after the last school bell rang on June 1, 1995. The unintended consequences of closing the Pemberton School impacted every aspect of town life.

The loss of the school is a wound shared by countless other communities whose neighborhood schools have closed. For the school is more than a place to educate children. The school represented decades of social capital invested by the

[66] Gerald Hofman, interview, August 8, 2012.

[67] Sue Kipp, interview, July 20, 2012.

community and where the community enjoyed the fruits of their investment through the activities at the school. The school building is where the community congregated to serve the needs of others. As Robert D. Putnam argues, people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with problems and make people more tolerant and less cynical to other's misfortunes.[68] Certainly some in Pemberton, as Cal Bjornson noted, found community connections in other places such as Jamie's Pub,[69] but a bar is a poor place to bring generations of a community together with shared historical connections.

In 1915, Dr. H. W. Foght, a researcher of American rural education for the United States government, stated,

> ...its [the school's] activities must reach beyond the four walls of the school into the entire school community to do the educational work of the whole people... Schools are becoming social centers. In many places assembly halls are used for regular country rallies of various kinds...[70]

Events such as the Pemberton proms decked with papier-mâché blossoms and the bi-annual plays and concerts performed by children to packed audiences, Jaycee planning sessions and Karen Volling's community computer classes, Judy Hoppe's "Drawing for Children" and Karen Sanderson's "Summertime Reading Recess" class for grades 1-6 along with Tami Collins' on "beginning Spanish for Kids" were, as of

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[68] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 288-289.

[69] Cal Bjornson interview, July 21, 2012.

[70] H. W. Foght, *The Rural School System of Minnesota: A Study in School Efficiency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 29.

June 1995, among those programs relegated to the town's past.[71] Pemberton's polestar, the school, was no more.

While Highway 83 connected Pemberton to the rest of the world, it also serves as a direct connection to St. Clair. No such direct connection exists between Pemberton and Janesville. Additionally, Janesville is twelve miles from Pemberton while St. Clair is half that distance. Eighty-three serves as the main thoroughfare for people traveling to Mankato, a south central Minnesota hub. Clearly from the interviews, convenience of traveling to and from work, past St. Clair to either pick up students or to see student activities in a direct line to home was enticing. Chuck and Sue Geariety, of Pemberton, said, "...we open enrolled our kids to St. Clair because it made more sense because we both worked in North Mankato."[72] However, Doug Baer, resident and current mayor of Pemberton, lives with the regret of choosing to open enroll his children to St. Clair just because his wife Candy worked in Mankato.[73] In the years prior to the closure of Pemberton few Pemberton families opted for open enrollment out of a sense of loyalty to the J-W-P district. However, once the Pemberton School closed all such loyalties ceased. St. Clair Superintendent Olson knew as much, as he recalled, "...when open enrollment happened, basically we

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[71] This list represents only a small portion of the many classes, programs, and meetings the Pemberton school building played host to in its years of service to the community. Annual activity sheets were produced by Waldorf and Pemberton and are now kept in Pemberton's community archives.

[72] Sue Geariety, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 8, 2012.

[73] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

knew down the road that Pemberton is going to end up in St. Clair." [74] As the nation and state had made clear with open enrollment, people were now completely independent of their districts, thus self-interest had trumped district loyalty.

Statewide, some students choose to open enroll in order to attend schools with higher academic scores, yet there was no mention of academic scores as a reason for enrolling children into the St. Clair School. Academic reasons for transfer have been more prevalent in failing inner-city schools. For example:

> ...over 7,500 students open enrollment out of the Minneapolis School District in 2003-2004. This represents 17 percent of total enrollment...The loss of state aid associated with this loss of students can make it more difficult for these struggling districts to obtain the resources necessary to improve performance.[75]

Other than convenience and bitterness towards J-W-P's School Board, other reasons given for students to open enroll out of J-W-P were to attend college through the PSEO program or to play sports for larger schools. Currently, few schools are immune to losing students to other schools due to sports and other nonacademic activities. Almost immediately after the passage of open enrollment, students like Paul Pagel of St. Clair began to look elsewhere. On November 11, 1988, the *Mankato Free Press* reported that Pagel "...decided he would benefit more from

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[74] Jerry Olson, interview, July 26, 2012.

[75] John F. Witte, Deven E. Carlson, and Lesley Lavery, "Moving On: Why Students Move Between Districts Under Open Enrollment," Department of Political Science, Last modified July, 2008, http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP164.pdf.

the visibility a larger school can provide in terms of possible college scholarships."[76] Pagel would go on to become an All-American wrestler for Minnesota State University. For the kids who open enrolled it was an opportunity to academically to excel individually, while for the districts they left it was a conundrum that the loss of students meant the likelihood of further cuts would likely endanger the district toward further enrollment losses.

No matter the reason, state aid to J-W-P dropped significantly as each student brought in over $4000 per year to the district. In order to keep the rest of the district from collapsing or face further consolidation, the J-W-P School Board in 2011 put forward a referendum that raised the rate of district funding from $571 per pupil to $1485.[77] Regardless of Pemberton and Waldorf cries of foul play, all district residents had to vote in Janesville, rather than in local polling places throughout the district. This discouraged a lot of voters outside of the old Janesville district from casting many "no" votes. The "no" votes were likely aided by voters from Waldorf. When Waldorf's school became the latest victim of district cuts, the parents of Waldorf's students reacted in a similar fashion to Pemberton's parents; namely, by open enrolling their children elsewhere. Today the vast majority of residents from the old Waldorf-Pemberton District have opted for open enrollment making a reality out of

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[76] Sue Menton, "Option Means Hard Choices," *Mankato Free Press*, 26 November 1988.

[77] Tanner Kent, "School Referendum info Meetings Coming to a Close," *Mankato Free Press*, 9 November 2011.

Bob Hoppe's fears that they "...would scatter to the four winds."[78] Gary Lienke expressed the feeling of powerlessness of Waldorf and Pemberton in relationship to Janesville when he said, "...Janesville gets their way pretty much—everything is Janesville. It isn't Waldorf Pemberton anymore, it's all Janesville."[79] While Janesville has the only school in the district, the clear loser in open enrollment, are districts like J-W-P that, as a result of open enrollment are unable to retain their students by means of the district boundaries. The J-W-P district has lost nearly fifty percent of its enrollment since pairing took place in 1989.[80] While Bob Hoppe's evaluation and judgment of the school board and Wilke for the Pemberton's school closure is overly simplistic, and does not take into account depopulation and market trends, he correctly assessed the future of J-W-P when he said,

> We lost 80 some students and basically that represented the end of a viable J-W-P merger...When J-W-P first started, there was something for Janesville, there was something for Pemberton, and there was something for Waldorf. All of a sudden Pemberton doesn't have anything. The whole game changes, you see...It didn't take an Einstein to figure this one out[81]

With no J-W-P school presence in Waldorf or Pemberton, any sense of connection to the district evaporated. Fewer and fewer people from Waldorf or Pemberton ran for the J-W-P school board. Currently, no Waldorf or Pemberton person serves on

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[78] "Area School Boards to Try to Develop Pairing Proposal," *Janesville Argus,* 3 February 1988.

[79] Gary Lienke, interview, August, 31, 2012.

[80] Cooperation and Combination Five Year Plan December 1989. In 1989, the districts of Janesville and Waldorf-Pemberton had a combined student enrolment of a 918, but the last few years the enrollment numbers are in the 500s.

[81] Bob Hoppe, interview, August 1, 2012.

the board. Sue Kipp summed it up stating, "...once they closed that building they just very much felt abandoned ... nobody cared about them." [82]

In the contest between the area school districts, J-W-P was a big loser in terms of enrollment loss. With the addition of many of Pemberton's children, St. Clair was able to remain independent with kindergarten through twelfth grade classes. Almost a third of the school's enrollment entered through the door that Rudy Perpich, Ronald Reagan, and Milton Friedman helped to open.[83] Hoppe stated at the time of pairing, "...if it [pairing] was done well, it could encourage neighboring districts to join the plan in a few years."[84] However, with the closure of Pemberton's school and open enrollment, schools like St. Clair never felt the need to "join the plan". Shortly after Pemberton's school closed, St. Clair felt threatened by its large neighbor, Mankato. Mankato East buses had begun to cross into the St. Clair district seeking willing students who wanted out. An unnamed St. Clair board member, needing to replenish St. Clair's enrollment numbers, instructed Palmer, owner of the bus company that St. Clair contracted, "to go get them [Pemberton's children]". The once sacred boundaries honored by the districts were no longer applicable in the age of competition. The St. Clair School Board knew that in order to survive it needed to court students from Pemberton. Members of St. Clair's staff routinely made visits to

[82] Sue Kipp, interview, July 20, 2012.

[83] Tanner Kent. "For St. Clair, a Tech-savvy School is a Magnet: Open Enrollment Swells the Student Body," *Mankato Free Press,* 5 September, 2011, 7.

[84] "Pairing," *Janesville Argus,* 17 August 1988.

Pemberton families in order to sell them on the idea of open enrolling in St. Clair. They held open enrollment day at the St. Clair building to sell would-be students on St. Clair's offerings. With the closure of Pemberton, convincing people to leave for the supposed greener pastures of St. Clair was not a tough sell. Today, every school day busses circle Pemberton taking most students to St. Clair while a handful of kids head off to Janesville.

The open enrollment system provided a freedom to choose a public school in a way that a few years ago was unthinkable to many small town residents; i.e., that neighbors would travel to different district schools in order to watch their sons and daughters perform. Often parents watch their son or daughter compete against their neighbor's son or daughter who plays for the opposition. Doug Baer recalled his feelings watching his daughter play for St. Clair.

> It hurts. Its hurts because the next year our oldest kid went to St. Clair [1995] and a few years later when she's playing varsity sports we're playing Janesville [-Waldorf-Pemberton], she should be on that team. Her friends that she went to school with, some of them are over in Janesville. It hurts to see that.[85]

A generation earlier these neighbors would have been cheering the same team, supporting the same booster club, peddling the same door-to-door fund raiser, and sharing rides to and from practice. These community connections gave strength to communities like Pemberton and Waldorf and now these connections have decreased as the emphasis on individuals has increased. Glen Schubbe expressed his

[85] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

feelings about the effects of open enrollment with, "To me it looked like—just like you take a family and take half of them and put them with somebody else—you're breaking a unit up of people that grew up together, worked together, and knew each other."[86]

With the school board's decision to close the Pemberton school, many families in Pemberton made plans for their children to attend St. Clair's school in the fall of 1995. The same year, the J-W-P district proposed a bond issue to close all the neighborhood schools in order to build an all -in-one school outside of Janesville at a cost of $14.8 million. $11.1 million would come from the district taxpayers with an additional $3.7 million offered by the state.[87] If passed, the bond issue's funds would create a school to compete with any school in the area, especially St. Clair. Yet the bond failed by 121 votes as it never received the support needed due to the preference for a neighborhood school and opposition to a tax. It is evident that for Pemberton voters that the most of the ties linking them with J-W-P district were cut and that Waldorf residents opposed the new building because not wanting to lose their community school. Pemberton and its townships cast sixty-four votes for a new K-12 school while 159 voted against it. In Waldorf and its townships there were

[86] Glen Schubbe, interview, July 26, 2012.

[87] All district referendum figures courtesy of the Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District Office.

seventy-three votes for and 501 votes against the referendum.[88] In the end, perhaps the best hope for a successful merger between Janesville, Waldorf, and Pemberton was also the one that would have sacrificed all the local schools in order to remain competitive. Unfortunately, those in Waldorf who wished to keep their neighborhood school, as evidenced by the 1995 bond issue's vote, lost their school after the 2008-2009 school year when the school district, facing yet more funding shortfalls, voted to close the Waldof building. When asked about the 1995 single-school project for the district, Dave Marzinske, Waldorf resident and former W-P school board member, stated, "'Ideally, it would be best to build [a new building] ...But we've got to be realistic,' noting that the three districts would then have three empty buildings."[89] Wilke continues to blame himself for not drumming up support for the bond issue's passage as well as not finalizing a building site. School competition is like sports in that there are winners and losers. Some win, retain their schools, and thrive in the new arena while other towns lose and are left wondering what different decisions should have been made. They wonder what the future holds for the community now that the town's heart and holder of its identity is lost.

Pemberton and Waldorf's residents continue to demonstrate a lack of support for the J-W-P School District as evident in every bond or referendum issue post 1995. Although an occasional referendum passes, it always faces stiff

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[88] All district referendum figures courtesy of the Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District Office.

[89] "Schools," *Janesville Argus,* 9 March 1988.

opposition from those in and around Waldorf and Pemberton as they are members of the J-W-P School District in name only. Understandably, Pemberton and Waldorf's residents vote against raising taxes in a district that their children by in large do not attend and at times compete against. But even when most voters in Waldorf and Pemberton vote "no" on raising funds for J-W-P, they cannot win a vote. Certainly a person traveling through Pemberton or Waldorf won't find a "vote yes" sign urging their neighbors to raise funds for the school district. This does not mean that the people of Pemberton, Waldorf, and elsewhere are powerless. The parents do vote, according to Cal Bjornson, "...they can vote with their kids."[90] As the residents of Waldorf and Pemberton vote with their kids the ballots overwhelmingly support other school districts at the expense of the district in which they reside.

[90] Cal Bjornson, interview, July 21, 2012.

Chapter 5

CLAIMING THE BUILDING

In the days prior to the closure of Pemberton's school, students, faculty, staff and community members wrote personal memoirs and well wishes on the large concrete bricks that lined the inside gymnasium wall. With tear-filled eyes the students said farewell to their teachers knowing that they would likely not see them again. The start of the 1995-1996 school year saw the vast majority of Pemberton's children hop on busses mostly bound for St. Clair's school, and leaving the Pemberton community behind to wonder what would happen now. What should happen to this school building, which had little function in the community other than to serve as a reminder of bygone years? As Mayor Doug Baer recalled concerning the loss of the Pemberton School, "It breaks the community up...It tears it...It's just like losing a family member...it just tears a community down."[1] This chapter examines the community of Pemberton, which like many small towns with vacant school buildings, struggles to reclaim its identity and reestablish severed community bonds that once were so closely tied to the school.

[1] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

In 1995, the J-W-P School District gave the building to the city of Pemberton along with a $10,000 maintenance fund. The agreement stipulated that the building could not be used for a school which would compete with the J-W-P School District. This agreement foiled any plans for the building to be used by a charter school or by another district. Without future plans, the building sat for years and was subject to vandals and weather. The building's use was limited largely to rental storage spaces and periodic recreation in the gym. The former school building resembled a tombstone whose worn bricks, broken windows, and leaking roof amounted to a sad epitaph on a community and district that turned its back on an old friend.

The topic of the school building came up often in the years after its closing. However, there was neither the political will to demolish it nor a willingness to spend the money to renovate it. Then in 2006, the city council led by Mayor Lienke and Councilman Doug Baer, decided to demolish the older section of the school which dated back to 1920 and for the 1955 section they argued for a comprehensive renovation.[2] On June 22, 2007, in a one day affair, the 1920 section of the building was razed to ground. In 1916, 1954 and 1986 bonds had been passed by the area's voters to construct and renovate sections of the Pemberton School. Yet Baer, understanding the likelihood of a bond issue failing and/or dividing the community, put the latest renovation plan solely on the shoulders of the council by arguing for a Certificate of Participation. Town Councils are able to pass a Certificate of

[2] As a note of irony, the 1920 section was torn down in the same month that a hundred years prior the first tracks were laid by the Alphabet Railroad Company in the area that became Pemberton.

Participation in order to fund building projects without putting the issue before the voters. An $855,000 Certificate of Participation was issued to Pemberton by US Bank on July 1, 2007.[3] Baer recalled, "I did the research....It was [about] $850,000 to have something or $350,000 to knock it [the building] down. For me to spend...to have something...it was the best decision we ever made."[4] According to Clarice Anderson, resident of Pemberton, the Certificate of Participation was the only way of getting the funds for the project. Had the town voted on raising taxes to obtain the needed project funds she was sure the request would have failed.[5] Baer himself agreed when he said, "...it [the renovation project] went through just on the vote of the council. Otherwise it would never have gotten done. It isn't probably the right way...But it would never have gotten done." Prior to becoming Pemberton's latest and current mayor, Baer spent years on the council and had grown tired of the constant topic of the school building being shelved and wanted to "...either do something...one way or another..."[6] As Baer waited for an opportune moment, others on the council chose to do nothing with the building.

The focus of the building was rife with controversy. One who saw little point in putting money into the building was one-time mayor, Perry Mortenson. He

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[3] "City of Pemberton," *Minnesota Certificates of Participation series 2007,* accessed July 8, 2014, http://emma.msrb.org/ER614800-ER477268-.pdf.

[4] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

[5] Clarice Anderson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, Telephone conversation, June 27, 2013.

[6] Clarice Anderson, interview, June 27, 2013.

recalled that when an initial study was conducted to get the community's feedback on the building's future, "nobody really wanted to spend the money.[7] When Baer was later elected mayor, he commissioned a survey conducted by the Minnesota State University, the results of which he admits were largely negative in regards to the renovation plans.[8] Mortenson is suspicious that there was ever the kind of support for the renovation claimed by Baer. Furthermore, Mortenson expressed his feeling that the community was duped into believing that the cost of the renovation would be offset by a new daycare would offset the expenditure.[9] Mortenson recalled that Baer and others had indicated that eighty children were in line to enroll in the daycare and the council anticipated renting space to businesses. However, he continues to be suspicious about the figures presented as those numbers never materialized. "In my opinion it was all fictitious figures that were brought to the people - just to sweeten it up."[10]

Regardless of the validity of the numbers, the passage of the Certificate of Participation paved the way for the creation of the Pemberton Academic Learning Services (PALS). PALS is a non-profit daycare and pre-school with 501.c3 status. It serves parents with children 0 to 10 years with programs for preschoolers, toddlers, infants, and latchkey students. Enrollment consistently fluctuates on a daily basis

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[7] Perry Mortenson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 31, 2012.

[8] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

[9] Perry Mortenson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 31, 2012.

[10] Perry Mortenson, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, August 31, 2012.

between seven and thirty. For the first time since the closure of the school, organized activities resumed in the fall of 1997. PALS, like the school it succeeded, requires the help of community volunteers to make meals and to make the PALS venture successful. On the day I spoke with Anderson, she (a regular volunteer) was in the process of making meals for twenty-one kids, all of whom she knew on a first name basis.[11] When asked why she volunteers she replied, "It's something that needs to be done and it's something that I can do. After all, I love and care for my community."[12] The connection to the school, its building, and love of the community are exuded on a daily basis by many of Pemberton's residents.

When the board applied and received approval for the Certificate of Participation, it was at the height of the housing bubble when borrowing was relatively easy. As a consequence of the housing bubble, the city grew in size as new houses were built. The city was able to secure a loan with a variable interest rate that began at 4.7 percent[13]. However, as the city clerk pointed out, soon the interest rate grew to over 6 percent. Within a few years, the town's yearly bill became $80,000.[14] When the bubble burst and the Great Recession deepened, potential renters disappeared and thus the projected dollars brought in by would-be

[11] Clarice Anderson, interview, June 27, 2013.

[12] Clarice Anderson, interview, June 27, 2013.

[13] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

[14] Darla Ward, interview by Paul Anderson, Pemberton, MP3, June 27, 2013.

businesses did not materialize. Instead, rental revenues have amounted to $15,000 per year.[15] Something clearly needed to be done as the city was finding it increasingly difficult to pay back the mortgage. The council decided on a course of action that put the entire property at risk of seizure by US Bank.

In 2010, the council voted to stop loan payments in an attempt to force US Bank to renegotiate a lower interest rate. Of course, US Bank was then within its right to seize the property and resell it. However, as the council suspected, US Bank had no desire to confiscate a renovated school building made into a community center in a town the size of Pemberton. After much back and forth discussion and delays, US Bank ultimately gave in to Pemberton's request and on July 31, 2012 the interest rate on the loan was dropped to a fixed 3 percent. Pemberton's new yearly loan bill became a manageable $40,000, which is scheduled to reach maturity on August 1, 2043.[16] It seemed that the risk taken by Baer and the council in both renovating and refinancing had paid off. Recently other communities facing similar dilemmas with closed school buildings are seeking Baer's advice. As Baer is quick to point out, "I think I've had twenty to twenty-five telephone calls from different towns... how do we do this, how do we get this done?...I even got a call from out in New York."[17] Pemberton resident Gary Lienke states that even St. Clair residents have made the

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[15] Darla Ward, interview, June 27, 2013.

[16] City Of Pemberton, Minnesota Certificates of Participation series 2007, Last modified July 27, 2012. http://emma.msrb.org/ER614800-ER477268-.pdf.

[17] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

comment, "Gee, I wish we had a building like Pemberton's in St., Clair."[18] When asked about former detractors of the project Baer mentions that usually once they have viewed and used the building their opinions have changed. Even Mortenson, who still has mixed feelings about the project and how the money was acquired without a city vote admits, "it's a beautiful building."[19] According to Baer, the appearance of the community center has spurred on the rest of the community to fix up their homes.[20] Thus it appears the school building which initially brought people together and cemented a community is still doing so decades later.

The building serves the community in a host of ways beyond PALS. It is rented out as a reception hall for weddings, school reunions, and family get-togethers. Other group events such as Ducks Unlimited, the National Night Out, Pemberton Fun Days, and annual community activities such as an Easter egg hunt and a children's Halloween party make use of the facilities. Recently the building served a group of concerned citizens in the Le Sueur River watershed area. Individuals like Patrick Moore, leader of Clean Up the River Environment, brought in high quality maps for people to view, discuss, and help generate ideas for ways to improve the quality of the local environment.[21] In addition to annual celebrations,

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[18] Gary Lienke, interview, August 31, 2012.

[19] Perry Mortenson, interview by Paul Anderson, MP3, August 31, 2012.

[20] Doug Baer, interview, August 30, 2012.

[21] "Map Party Draws Together Le Sueur River Enthusiasts," *Mankato Free Press,* 13 April 2012, 5.

and perhaps more importantly, the community center provides for Pemberton's residents on a daily basis. It is another place for the community to gather other than the tavern or gas station. Baer recalled a recent gathering of three generations working on a display portfolio about the history of the building. The community center provides the area with a well-stocked library, computer center, gymnasium, and the always-important historical display. The display includes pictures, school mementos, and glowing descriptions of the community's past. It shows each fire truck purchased along with pictures of the town's most notable past and present residents. Of special note are the Pemberton Tigers' mementos that include a basketball uniform, a pennant and the picture that haunted me as a school boy, the 1957 boys' basketball team picture. Perhaps the picture continues to fuel the imaginations of Pemberton's children today with the message that they too are a part of something greater than themselves. For many of them, Highway Eighty-three will serve as a way out of the town and likely as a road to communities much larger than Pemberton. Pemberton is not unlike other rural towns that struggle to keep their identities in a mobile world where people live life at what past generations see as a frantic pace. Pemberton's community center stands as a reminder of how people can work together to create something that causes the passersby to slow down and celebrate the pace of small town America.

As noted, the J-W-P School Board agreement has kept Pemberton from opening a competing school. Although the district boundaries are unable to keep

children in the district or to keep rival schools' busses out, the district still tries to limit competition. As in the business market where companies seek to limit and ultimately crush their competition, so this competitive attitude remains prevalent in schools today. Open enrollment, along with the national and local fluctuations in the economy, a lack of building funds, new administrations, and perhaps most importantly the rural population decline of the twentieth century, helped ensure the closure of the Pemberton's school and later the school in Waldorf. Pemberton's school closure severed historical cords that held the community of Pemberton together and revitalizing these ties with a charter school is not an option. Instead, now the Pemberton Community Center serves that role, as the center of the community's activities and ultimately its identity.

Baer and other members of the community are hopeful that the J-W-P District will allow a charter school or begin to offer Kindergarten classes once again in the building. Recent talks with regard to the return of the school district's presence in the Pemberton building have occurred between Baer and J-W-P's Superintendent Bill Adams. There is no word yet if the district will choose to resurrect a district presence in the town of Pemberton.

The closure of schools continues to hit towns large and small hard as evidenced by other community leaders calling Pemberton's mayor, wondering if they too might be able to accomplish what Pemberton has with its former school building. The closure of schools is becoming all too often a national educational trend that has

accelerated with open enrollment and the idea that competition makes schools more apt to meet the students' needs. Recently the town of Anderson, Indiana was featured on PBS' News Hour. Anderson today competes with nearby school districts and charter schools. This competition coupled with the loss of manufacturing jobs has caused the closure of 24 school buildings in Anderson.[22] Although Anderson is a larger town than the towns on Highway 83, it still faces the dilemmas of how to keep a community united in the age of school competition.

Choice and competition appear too many to be the cure-all for what is often dubbed as an American educational crisis; however what is often lost is how these policies alter towns and districts as they compete for students with other communities. Open enrollment, depending on the individual and to some extent the community and the school district, is either abhorrent or a godsend. With no alterations of or challenge to state or federal education policy, small towns and their schools have been and continue to be affected by forces beyond their control. As evidenced in the number of school closings in rural as well as in urban centers, it is clear that the neighborhood school is fading in the same way that country one-room schools once did.

In closing, the words of Diane Ravitch, who served as an educational advisor in the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, ring true in all the towns

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[22] "Indiana Crafts Dropout Remedy Through Choice of Schools," *PBS*, accessed July 8, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/july-dec11/tulenko_11-09.html.

along Highway 83, whether they currently have a school or not, as they do with thousands of other rural towns in America:

> Do we need neighborhood public schools? I believe we do. The neighborhood school is the place where parents meet to share concerns about their children and the place where they learn the practice of democracy. They create a sense of community among strangers. As we lose neighborhood public schools, we lose the one local institution where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up in debate and engage in democratic give-and-take with their neighbors. For more than a century they have been an essential element of our democratic institution. We abandon them at our own peril ... Just as every neighborhood should have a reliable fire station, every neighborhood should have a good public school.[23]

Her hope is my hope that small town residents can reclaim their schools. Yet, in the face of present closings, it is also my hope that buildings that were once the epicenters of communal identity would remain standing as vibrant places of interaction and hope for the future.

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[23] Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 220-221.

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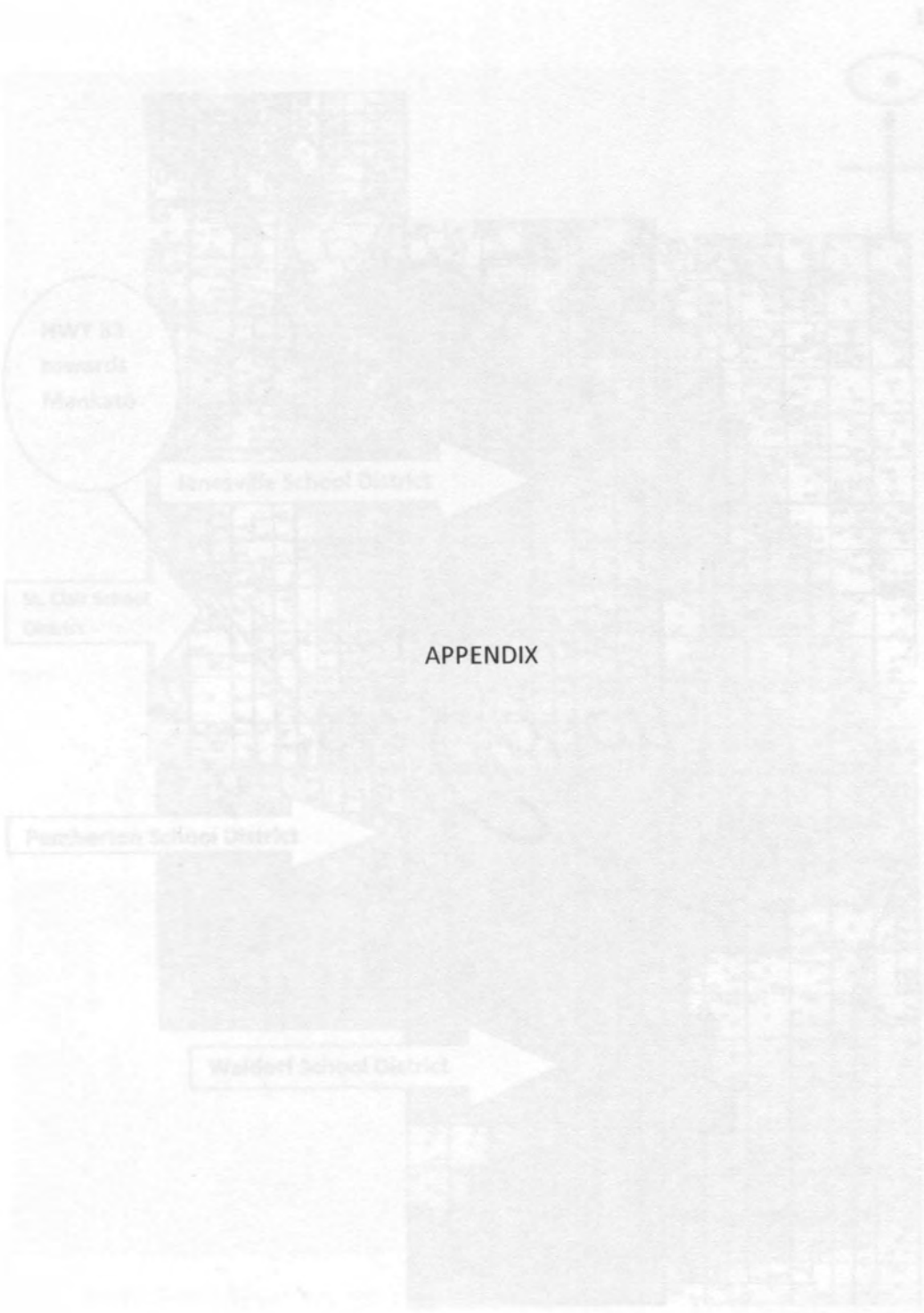
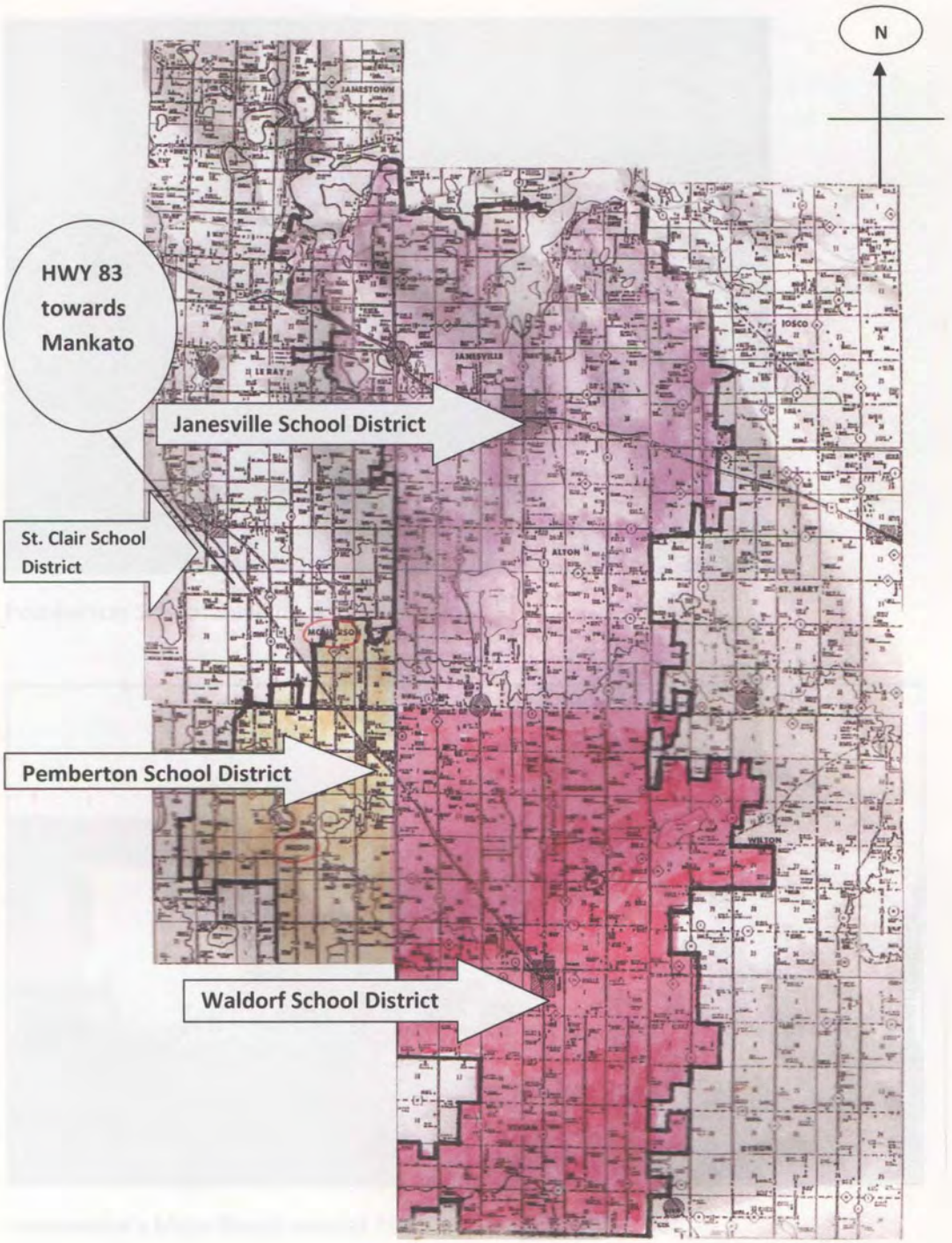


APPENDIX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HWY 83 towards Mankato
Janesville School District
St. Clair School District
Pemberton School District
Waldorf School District
JANESTOWN
JANESVILLE
ALTON
IOSCO
ST. MARY
WILTON

Pemberton School Building around 1920

Pemberton's Main Street around 1920

Pemberton High School Prom—1924

Remains of the Pemberton Café and gas station on Main Street

Pemberton around 1940

Construction of Minnesota Highway 83 mid 1950s (note the school in the background)

1957 Pemberton Tigers boys basketball team

1920 section of the Pemberton School building prior to demolition

The demolition of Pemberton's school building

Pemberton's current welcome sign on Highway 83