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Article Summary: By the end of World War II demographic changes in the rural population and enrollment in rural schools in Nebraska made the need for reorganization pressing. In 1949 the Nebraska legislature passed LB 27, the Reorganization of School Districts Act, which took effect on August 27, 1949. In 1955 and in 1963, the act was amended to be more comprehensive and more specific. This article follows the course of re-organization of the Adams County school district from 1949 through 1989.

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Photographs / Images: Trumbull school bus, 1920s; Adams County School District No 47; School District boundaries, Adams County, Nebraska, 1919; Adams County School District No 75; Adams Central Junior-Senior High School, April 11, 1969 with inset of Groundbreaking ceremonies November 11, 1967

# PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION AND CONSOLIDATION IN ADAMS COUNTY, NEBRASKA, 1949-1989

By Steven J. Buss

Frederick C. Luebke pointed to Nebraska's school system as a distinguishing feature of the state in his essay in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, published in 1988.<sup>1</sup> State funding for Nebraska schools was the lowest in the nation in 1945 with about one percent of funding coming from the state.<sup>2</sup> By 1989 it had increased to about twenty-six percent,<sup>3</sup> but Nebraska still ranked forty-ninth of the fifty states in state funding.<sup>4</sup> In 1945 Nebraska had the lowest pupil average daily attendance per district (29) and the lowest average population per district (173) as well as the lowest assessed value per district (\$11,826).<sup>5</sup> Nebraska had more one-teacher schools than any other state from the 1950s through the 1980s,<sup>6</sup> and led the nation in the number of school districts from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> In 1989 Nebraska had more than twenty school districts supporting only high school education that were superimposed over districts that supported only elementary education.<sup>8</sup> Another unique aspect of the Nebraska school system in 1989 was the retention of the office of county superintendent of schools in many counties after the

introduction of educational service units, with both serving as intermediate units between the state and local school districts.<sup>9</sup>

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 provided for education in the new territory of Nebraska, requiring that sections sixteen and thirty-six in each township "shall be and the same are hereby reserved for the purpose of being applied to schools in said territory and the states and territories hereafter to be erected out of the same."

On March 16, 1855, the territorial legislature passed a free public school act, adapted from existing Iowa laws, to provide for the establishment of common schools. The law required the state librarian to serve as the state superintendent of schools. It provided for the election of county superintendents who were to establish school districts in the counties based on petitions by voters. The officers of the board of education in each district were to "examine or cause to be examined" prospective teachers for the schools.<sup>10</sup>

The territory of Nebraska adopted the township district system in 1858. Under this early form of school district reorganization, the tax base and control of schools would cover an entire

township of thirty-six square miles rather than just a local district of only a few square miles. The law providing for the township district plan in Nebraska was complex, and an effective system of tax collection was not in place to provide funds for its implementation. Even though Nebraska had two sections of land in each township to provide funding for schools, the federal government would not release these lands for sale while Nebraska remained a territory. There was no effective leadership for education at the county or territorial level. The establishment of schools was largely dependent upon local initiative.<sup>11</sup>

When Nebraska was granted statehood in 1867 the township district plan was eliminated, and the independent district system of school organization was again adopted. The law provided for a moderator, director, and treasurer to serve as officers of a school board for each local district. Districts were to be formed by citizens under the direction of an elected county superintendent.<sup>12</sup> Although the titles of the officers of the local school board have been changed and their authority over the operation of schools tempered by state statutes, this independent district system is still the system of school organization in Nebraska.

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Provisions for funding have also played an important part in shaping the organization of schools in Nebraska. Funds from the sale and lease of school lands received from the federal government in the Kansas-Nebraska Act have provided a decreasing percentage of the total public school budget. By 1945 proceeds from the land grant fund amounted to only 3.8 percent of the total school budget<sup>13</sup> and by 1989 this fund provided two percent of the funding for schools in Nebraska.<sup>14</sup>

Funding for schools had to come from taxation to compensate for the lack of revenue from state school lands. Because of austere economic conditions in the 1870s, the state constitution of 1875 eliminated the constitutional provision for state tax aid to public schools.<sup>15</sup> According to D. F. Bergman, writing in *Catalyst* in 1978, this elimination of state aid in 1875 "contributed more to the formation of large numbers of school districts than any other one action or event."<sup>16</sup>

State aid to schools in the late

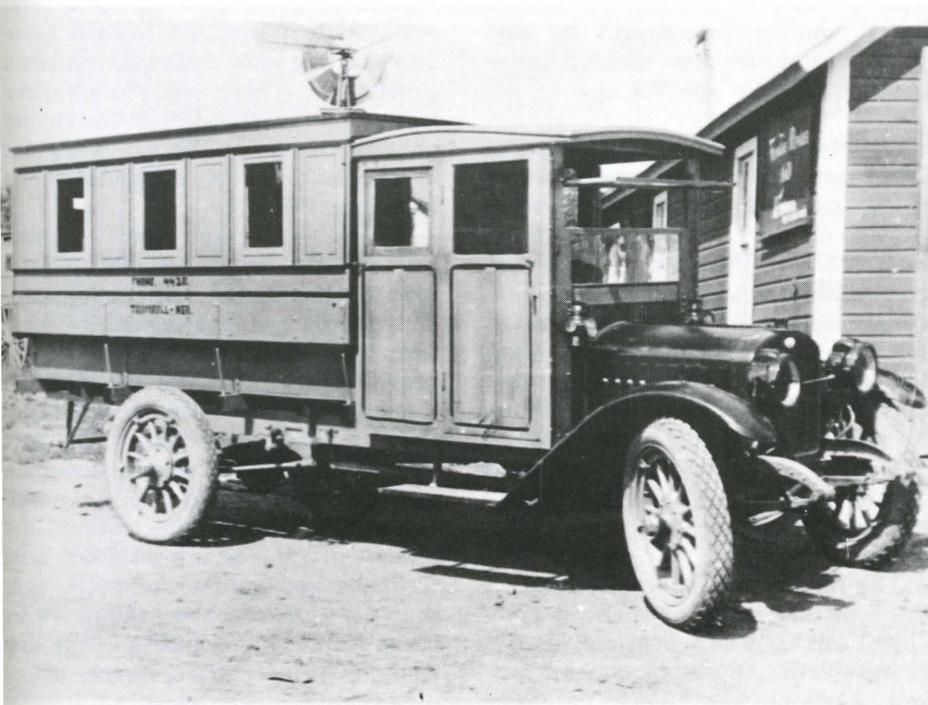
nineteenth century came in part from liquor licenses and fines. According to some sources the illegal licensing of brothels also provided funds for public schools.<sup>17</sup> Fines for prostitution are reported to have helped fund schools in Hastings in the late 1800s.<sup>18</sup>

With state aid providing only a limited part of the public school's operating budgets, local property taxes became the main source of revenue for schools in Nebraska. A constitutional amendment that would have provided more state aid to schools was defeated by a two to one margin in 1946.<sup>19</sup> The passage of LB 448 in 1967 provided for state aid to schools,<sup>20</sup> but the level of state aid to schools in Nebraska was still below that of all but one other state in 1989.<sup>21</sup>

Several other legislative acts affecting education early in Nebraska's history have influenced its educational system. A free high school tuition law passed in 1907 allowed graduates of Nebraska's common schools to attend the high school of their choice after

passing an examination if the student's district did not maintain a high school. The tuition would be paid to the high school district, and would be financed by a levy on all the elementary school districts in each county. The free high school tuition law will "sunset" in 1992.<sup>22</sup>

Almost from its inception many professional educators found fault with the independent district system of school organization. William K. Fowler, Nebraska state superintendent from 1901 to 1905, recommended the consolidation of school districts and centralization of schools. His successor, Jasper L. McBryan, also advocated consolidation, but he was unsuccessful in convincing the legislature to enact consolidation laws.<sup>23</sup> A proposal to adopt a "county unit" system of school organization by a school code revision committee in 1915 was not adopted by the legislature.<sup>24</sup> A school district consolidation act was passed by the legislature in 1919 but was later declared unconstitutional. In 1921 the



*Trumbull schoolbus, 1920s. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society.*



*Adams County School District No. 47. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society.*

law was amended to correct these constitutional problems. The 1921 law was unsuccessful in bringing about massive reorganization but did result in some consolidation of school districts.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of World War II demographic changes in the rural population and enrollment in rural schools in Nebraska made the need for reorganization more pressing. Enrollment in elementary school districts had decreased from 129,507 in 1922 to 53,925 in 1946.<sup>26</sup> Of the 6,985 school districts in Nebraska in 1946, 22.3 percent were non-operating districts.<sup>27</sup> One-teacher schools with an average attendance of nine pupils existed in 4,626 of the operating school districts in 1946. One fourth of all elementary students were sent under contract to schools in other districts. One third of all high school students attended school under the free high school tuition law in high schools outside their districts.<sup>28</sup> The mill levy in school districts varied from zero to 74.8 in 1947-48.<sup>29</sup> In many cases the school district had become only a taxing district. Parents of children sent to schools outside their own district had no voice in the operation of the schools their children attended.

In 1949 the Nebraska legislature passed LB 27, the Reorganization of School Districts Act, which took effect

on August 27, 1949. The law required the county superintendent of schools to call a meeting of all school board members in the county within 120 days. These board members would then elect a County Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts, which was to develop plans for such reorganization by 1953. The county committee was also to hold public hearings and then submit plans to the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts, which was appointed by the governor. The state committee's recommendation was not binding on the county committees. The proposal would then appear on the ballot in a special election.<sup>30</sup>

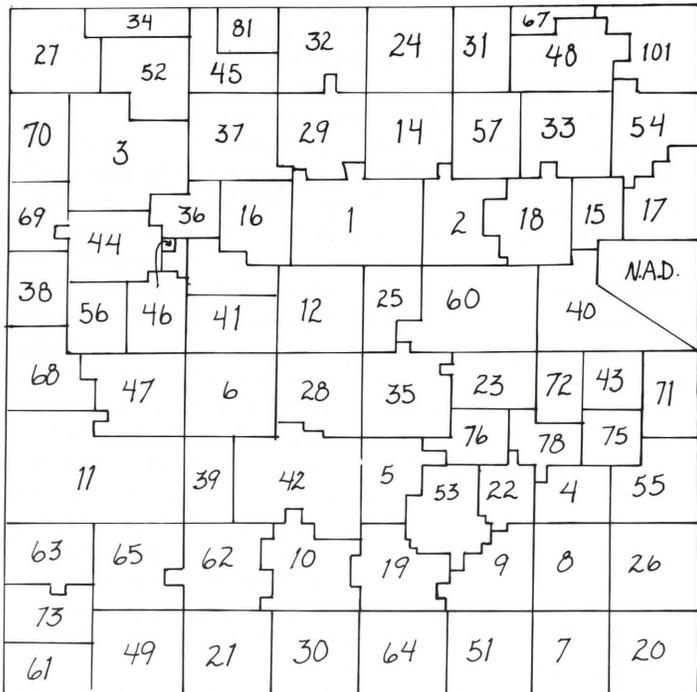
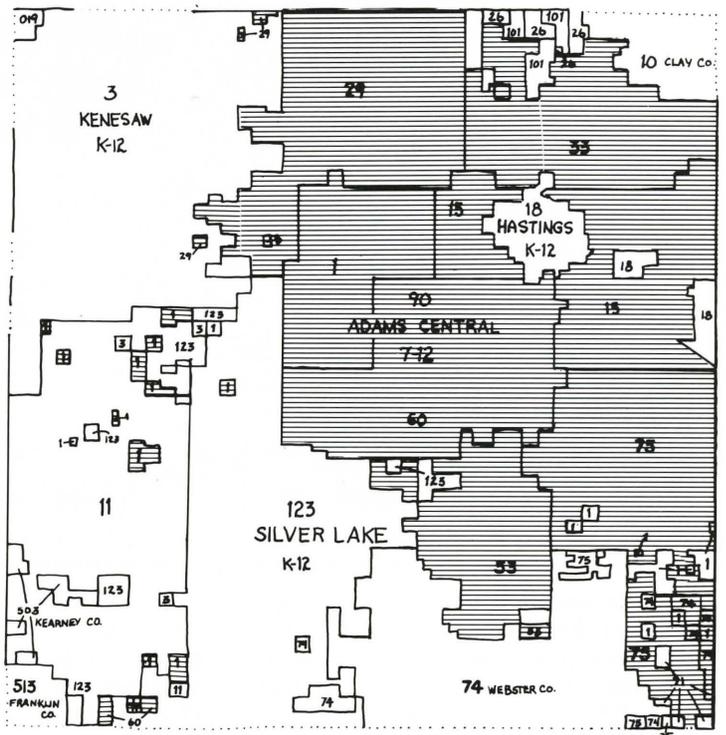
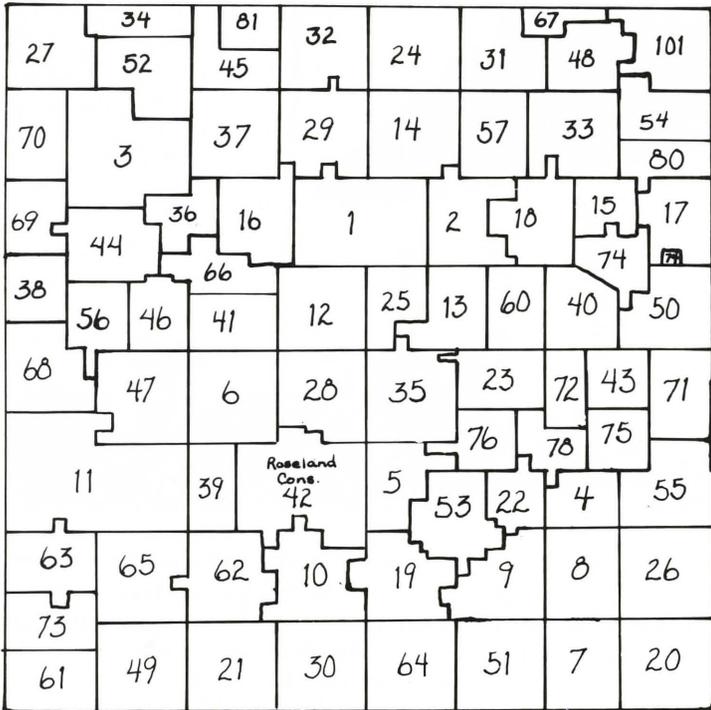
In 1955 the reorganization act was amended to require county committees to develop "comprehensive" plans for the entire county in addition to their earlier responsibilities of coordinating reorganization on a smaller scale.<sup>31</sup> In 1963 the reorganization act was again changed, and the county committees were no longer required to submit a comprehensive plan. Instead, they were to develop a plan of organization that would be "a concrete proposal for the readjustment and realignment of the boundaries of any or all school districts within the county."<sup>32</sup>

Just as the original formation of

schools in Nebraska was dependent on local sentiment, the reorganization of school districts was a matter to be determined by local, county-level politics and opinion. In some counties reorganization was well accepted, but in others there was little or no reduction in the number of school districts. The number of school districts per county did not seem to be directly related to the size of the county.<sup>33</sup>

The laws concerning the makeup of the county committees came under criticism in the 1960s for giving too much representation to small Class I school districts, which maintained only elementary grades.<sup>34</sup> The law was subsequently changed to provide better representation for all classes of districts.<sup>35</sup> Statutes were also enacted that made it more difficult to form a high school (Class VI) district within five miles of an existing K-12 district, but not before the school district structure in Adams County had been shaped by the Adams County Reorganization Committee and a rural high school had been built about three miles west of Hastings.<sup>36</sup>

School districts began to be formed in Adams County only days after the county was organized. District 1 was formed on December 16, 1871. The formation of school districts proceeded



 ADAMS CENTRAL

School district boundaries, Adams County, Nebraska, 1919. Adapted from G. W. Anderson, Atlas of Adams County (Mason City, Iowa: Anderson Publishing Company, 1919) . . . . (below left) School district boundaries, Adams County, Nebraska, 1949. Adapted from Adams County Superintendent of Schools, Adams County Reorganization Committee files . . . . (above right) School district boundaries, Adams County, Nebraska, 1989. Adapted from Management Assistance Section, Nebraska State Department of Education, Lincoln, Nebraska.

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rapidly as the county was settled and underwent tremendous population growth in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>37</sup>

In the sixty to eighty years that most of these district schools existed, they provided education for several generations of many families. Many served as churches, meeting places for farm organizations, and as centers for social activities. Many individuals gained the knowledge and experience of running a school by serving as school board members for the district.<sup>38</sup>

The number of school districts in Adams County remained stable through the first half of the twentieth century. But in this period changes in farming practices, the trend toward fewer farms, and increasing opportunities in urban areas had caused enrollment to drop in the rural and village schools. Districts with few students often did not operate a school and contracted with other districts to educate their students.

By 1948 there was a tremendous variation between Adams County districts in per pupil costs, assessed valuation, and tax levies. In 1947 a Public School Equalization League was formed in the southwest portion of Adams County to make legislative recommendations designed to correct some of these inequities.<sup>39</sup> Daniel E. Snyder of Holstein wrote several letters to the State Department of Education and testified at legislative hearings on reorganization.<sup>40</sup>

A Legislative Council subcommittee hearing on redistricting was held in Hastings October 2, 1948. At this hearing James McClure of Blue Hill drew applause when he stated that any "compulsory form of redistricting would meet vigorous opposition."<sup>41</sup>

The School District Reorganization Act took effect on August 27, 1949. In compliance Ida Blomenkamp, the Adams County superintendent of schools, called a meeting of all school board members in the county for October 21, 1949. The board members then elected nine individuals to make up the Adams County Reorganization

Committee, with the county superintendent as an ex-officio member. All board members were from rural school districts.

Blomenkamp had corresponded with her counterpart in Hall County concerning school districts bordering Adams County in January 1950. His reply, scratched on the bottom margin of Blomenkamp's letter, gives some indication of the sentiment toward reorganization in an adjacent county:

We have done nothing and I don't know that we will. The committee is not to [sic] willing and the people and the high school districts don't seem to want it.<sup>42</sup>

The Adams County Reorganization Committee held six meetings from October 1949 to October 1950. During the year one district (50) was dissolved and became part of District 40. In this first year of operation the committee spent \$7.20 of the \$1,000 allocated to it by the county.<sup>43</sup>

One of the first major reorganization plans developed for Adams County by the reorganization committee was the consolidation of several elementary districts with District 3, a high school district that included the village of Kenesaw in the northwest portion of the county. This involved the consolidation of portions of Districts 34, 38, 46, 68, and all of 56, 69, and 70. Three public hearings were held to explain and discuss the plan with the voters early in 1953.<sup>44</sup> Testimony given by Chester Owens at a public hearing on January 6, 1953, in Kenesaw provides some insight into one voter's views on education:

I am just a resident in the district and I have a child in school. I have been watching this redistricting program with some interest. It seems to me that we kind of begin to lose track of what it is all about. It is for the children's benefit and not for the convenience of the old folks, who are in the district . . . Look at it from the children's standpoint of where he will get the best education.<sup>45</sup>

The plan was submitted to the state committee on September 1, 1953, and approved by voters in an election held December 10, 1953.<sup>46</sup> Areas in the southwest portion of Adams County were also included in reorganization

plans. A plan for the reorganization of districts around Holstein was submitted to the state committee September 1, 1953, and was approved by voters in December.<sup>47</sup>

By October of 1953 the members of the first Adams County Reorganization Committee had served the four-year term provided for in the Reorganization Law of 1949. A new county committee developed a comprehensive plan for the reorganization of county school districts that was sent to the state director in April of 1957. This plan, which involved the division of Adams County into twelve school districts, was not acted upon by the state committee.<sup>48</sup>

On October 30, 1957, the school board members of Adams County again met for the third time to elect members to the county reorganization committee. This election caused a complete change in the membership of the county committees; no one from the previous committee was re-elected.

In an article in the *Hastings Tribune* for March 4, 1958, County Superintendent Wenona Harris described the progress that had been made in school district reorganization in Adams County. The number of school districts had been reduced from seventy-two in 1951 to twenty-six functioning districts in 1958. Four districts had been dissolved in 1957, and in 1958 only one district (12) was contracting with another district.<sup>49</sup>

On February 10, 1958, the county committee voted to reject the plan for the reorganization of school districts in Adams County that had been developed by the previous committee.<sup>50</sup> Later in February a plan for the reorganization of four town districts was discussed.<sup>51</sup> On March 23, 1959, a hearing was held at the county fairgrounds to discuss the merger of Districts 1 (Juniata), 11R (Holstein), 12, 28, 29, 35, 42 (Roseland), and 81 (Prosser) into one Class III District. The site of a proposed new high school for these districts was also to be discussed.<sup>52</sup>

This merger plan was strongly opposed at the hearing.<sup>53</sup> The county committee developed a new comprehensive plan that was submitted to the state committee and reviewed May 4, 1960. This plan divided Adams County into three school districts: Hastings, Kenesaw, and a proposed new district that was to include both the southern part and a portion in the north central area of the county.<sup>54</sup>

In elections held on November 7, 1961, the county committee again experienced a substantial change in membership. Only one member was re-elected. The development of a plan to meet the needs of rural high school students became the major task of the county reorganization committee in the 1960s.

While the decline in the rural population and rural school enrollment had caused problems for rural school districts after World War II, the increase of students in Hastings as a result of population growth and the "baby boom" in the 1960s had created another type of problem for the Hastings schools. The Hastings junior and senior high schools were becoming crowded in the early 1960s.<sup>55</sup> Rural students that came from outside the Hastings school district were attending these schools under Nebraska's free high school tuition law. In February 1963, eighty-one students from fifteen districts outside Hastings were attending Hastings High School.<sup>56</sup> A mill levy of 6.26 mills in the rural districts covered the annual tuition costs of \$585.00 per student per year. However, the high schools were not bound by law to accept these students if conditions made it impossible for them to do so.<sup>57</sup>

At the February 4, 1963, meeting, the Hastings school board reaffirmed its desire

to continue efforts toward developing and maintaining a program of education recognized by the State Department of Education as a Class AA program. A study of statistics in terms of enrollments and capacities of existing facilities indicates that by 1964-65 the Hastings Board of Education will be forced to choose between continuing to serve non-resident pupils or continuing the present program of education.<sup>58</sup>

An editorial that appeared in the *Hastings Tribune* of February 6, 1963, outlined three choices for rural residents if Hastings High School was unable to accept rural students in the future: (1) petition to have their district join the Hastings District, (2) have a reorganization plan approved by both the Hastings and rural districts, or (3) send students to another high school in the area.<sup>59</sup> Reorganization that would have involved the merger of rural districts with the Hastings district was unacceptable to many in the rural districts because of differences in property valuation between urban and rural areas if the same mill levy was applied.

While merger with the Hastings district was not acceptable to many rural residents, there were individuals among them who respected the quality of the Hastings school system and worked to develop a means for the Hastings and rural districts to work together. Dr. Richard Short, superintendent of Hastings Public Schools, worked with Merlyn Lay, Bob Johnson, and several others from the rural areas to develop a "confederation" of school districts law.<sup>60</sup> Introduced in the legislature by Senator Richard Marvel of Hastings, it was passed and became effective in 1965. Under the provisions of this law, rural districts would retain their autonomy, but would work with a "parent" district to provide for high school education for students in their district. This law was still a part of Nebraska statutes in 1988.<sup>61</sup>

Adams County Superintendent Wenona Harris also helped develop a plan to provide for the education of rural high school students. She helped call a meeting and served as secretary for the Citizens Committee that organized on February 6, 1964. Dan Snyder was elected temporary chairman of this meeting.<sup>62</sup>

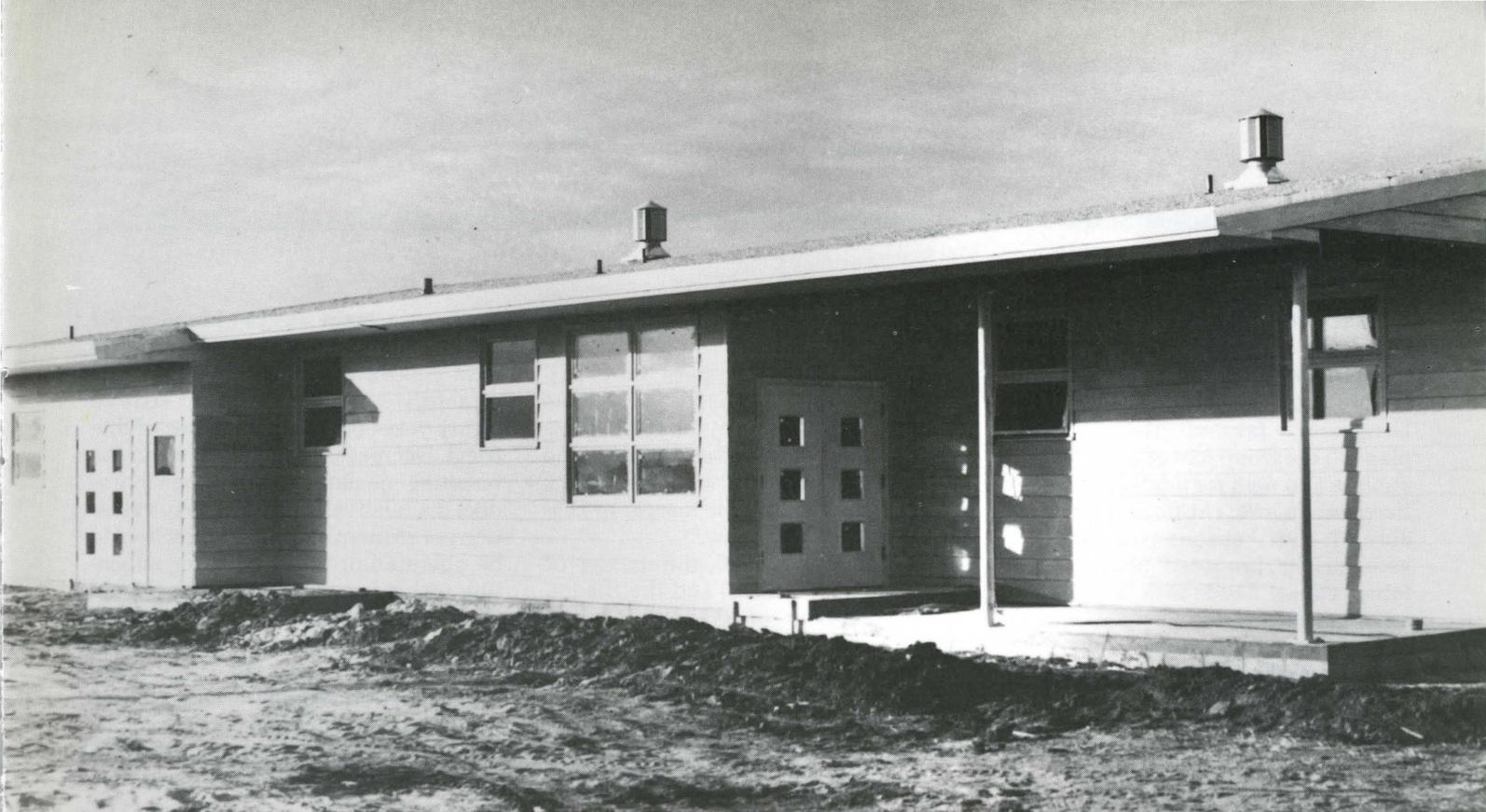
On February 28, 1964, the Citizens Committee met at the Adams County Courthouse. Merlyn Lay was elected permanent chairman of this group. Dr. Short addressed this meeting, and

there was some discussion about the formation of a Class VI high school district to meet the needs of rural students.<sup>63</sup>

The May 14, 1964, meeting of the county committee was adjourned to attend the meeting of the Citizens Committee and later reconvened. The Citizens Committee requested that an educational survey of Adams County be conducted by Dr. Merle Stoneman of the University of Nebraska.<sup>64</sup> This survey was begun July 16, 1964, by the School Survey Advisory Service under the direction of Dr. Stoneman and David W. Hutcheson of the Nebraska State Department of Education.<sup>65</sup> Members of the survey committee visited all Class II and Class III schools, and all Class I districts with more than one teacher to study enrollments, mill levies, curriculum, and transportation.<sup>66</sup>

The survey committee concluded that "the best possible answer to the long-range school district reorganization problem would be to include most or all of the county in a single school district." Their second choice for reorganization was the division of Adams County into two school districts.<sup>67</sup> A letter from David W. Hutcheson to Wenona Harris of September 15, 1965, recommended that the reorganization plans developed by the county committee should reflect the recommendations of the survey by the University of Nebraska and the State Department of Education, rather than include a plan that would involve a federation of districts in Adams County.<sup>68</sup>

In meetings of the county committee on October 28, 1965, and November 18, 1965, it was formally proposed that Adams County be reorganized into one school district. This motion died for lack of a second. At the meeting in November a motion was made that the state committee was to be advised that "Adams County was not ready for any definite plan of reorganization," but that the county committee had been active and a Citizens Committee had been formed and the "Federation of



*Adams County School District No. 75. Courtesy of Hastings Tribune.*

Schools” had become law. This motion carried.<sup>69</sup> In the fall of 1965 an election was held to select members for the county committee. At the meeting of the county committee on February 3, 1966, the committee voted to work to form a Class VI district.<sup>70</sup>

One of the problems in the formation of a new district and the building of a new school was that many of the villages in Adams County wanted to have the school built in their area or village. However, Al Plantz, county committee chair, believed that the new school should be located on “neutral” ground so that the farmers would support it and so that no village would feel it was losing its identity by joining the school.<sup>71</sup>

On February 17, 1966, the county committee voted to employ attorney John Wagoner to do the legal work in drawing up plans for a Class VI high school.<sup>72</sup> At the meeting of the committee on February 22, 1966, the motion was made to include districts 29, 31, 33, 60, 75, 35, 8, 15, and 1 in a plan to form a Class VI district. Surrounding districts were to be encouraged to join. The new high school was to be located as near as possible to the geographic center of the new district.<sup>73</sup>

Public hearings were held to discuss this plan. Those attending the first hearing on March 14 in Pauline for District 8 voted to be excluded from the plan. Some of the district’s high school students attended Blue Hill High School under the free high school tuition law, while others went to Hastings High School. District 8’s acceptance of a Class VI district would have eliminated this choice of high schools, because all students would have been required to attend the high school of the Class VI district.<sup>74</sup> At the hearing for District 15 and 33 on March 21, Al Plantz stated, “The committee felt that the districts were not interested in a federation with Hastings.”<sup>75</sup> Dr. Richard Short wrote Wenona Harris in March of 1966, informing her that the Hastings Board of Education had met March 2 and had authorized a communication with Merlyn Lay to assure rural people that the board of education was willing to work with them.<sup>76</sup>

On May 3, 1966, the State Reorganization Committee rejected the plan of the Adams County committee.<sup>77</sup> The rejection was anticipated. Al Plantz explained the rural school situation in Adams County: “They decided by going Class VI they would get good

reorganization started [,] making it much easier in the future to go K-12 if they wanted to.”

A letter from H. C. Ebmeier to Wenona Harris on May 4 outlined the reasons for the state committee’s rejection of the Class VI plan of the Adams County committee. The state committee felt that reorganization with Hastings would be easy and allow students access to an existing AA accredited high school. The state committee stated that a Class VI organization could not provide a coordinated K-12 program and involved a dual system of organization that would lead to higher costs. The state committee also felt that Class VI districts were not a stable form of organization and were difficult to change to K-12 organization at a later date.<sup>78</sup>

Under the Reorganization Law of 1949 the county committee was not bound by the decision of the state committee. The Adams County committee voted to proceed with plans to hold an election for the voters in the districts involved. The county committee also voted to drop District 31 from the proposed Class VI plan.<sup>79</sup> The election was to be held on July 29, 1966.<sup>80</sup>

Prior to the election two groups were

formed with opposing viewpoints on the merits of the plans for the creation of a Class VI district. The Citizens for a Rural High School, led by Glen Daugherty, favored the proposed plan.<sup>81</sup> This group met July 21, 1966, in Juniata and paid for a full-page advertisement in the *Hastings Tribune* of July 27, 1966, encouraging voters to vote for the proposed plan to avoid forced consolidation with the Hastings school district.<sup>82</sup>

The opposing group, the Rural Citizens for Good Education, felt that a Class VI high school was not the best solution to the problem. The chairman, Dr. Russell McIntire, stated that "the most frequent problems leading to dissatisfaction with a Class 6 [VI] school district have concerned difficult and multiple administration, excessive costs, and the educational disadvantages created by lack of a unified school system."<sup>83</sup>

Despite the controversy, only 832 out of an estimated 1,600 eligible voters participated in the special election July 29, 1966. The proposal carried, with 576 approving the plan to form a Class VI district.<sup>84</sup>

On August 13, 1966, the Adams County Reorganization Committee appointed six individuals to serve on the school board of the newly formed district, designated District 9 by the county superintendent.<sup>85</sup> On October 4 the voters in District 9 selected a site about three miles west of Hastings for the location of the new high school. On November 10 a bond issue to fund the building of this school failed.<sup>86</sup> On May 11, 1967, voters approved a bond issue for the construction of the new high school, and the school was in operation by September 3, 1968. Adams Central was the name chosen for the new school.<sup>87</sup> The legislature later passed laws that prohibited the formation of a Class VI district within five miles of an existing Class III district without a majority vote in the Class III district in favor of joining the Class VI district. These restrictive laws were changed in 1988, and in 1989 it was easier to form a

Class VI district than it had been from 1971 to 1988.

In the late 1960s there were still several small districts in Adams County. At its February 18, 1970, meeting the county committee approved the merger of District 53 with the Adams Central district and the merger of District 35 with District 60.<sup>88</sup>

On January 1, 1986, the merger of District 42 (Roseland) and the Bladen School District of Webster County became effective. A new Class III district was formed that was designated District 123, Silver Lake Public School. High school students attended school in Roseland, and elementary students attended school in Bladen in 1989.<sup>89</sup>

In 1988 LB940 was passed by the Nebraska legislature. This bill changed the way county committee members were chosen and required new county committees to be formed before November 5, 1988. Under the provisions of LB940, the committee was to submit a plan of reorganization for the county to the state committee by January 1, 1990. This plan did not have to involve anything more than a statement that the committee would consider the present organization of districts in the county to be its plan of organization. There was no penalty for not submitting a plan.

As Adams County entered the 1990s, Eileen Noll was the only teacher at Rising Star School, School District 29, which had an enrollment of fourteen students in grades kindergarten through sixth. District 53, Ayr, had two teachers in a school with an enrollment of seventeen students.<sup>90</sup>

Why had forty years of school district reorganization activity in Adams County not eliminated these small schools that had enrollments no larger than the schools that existed in the county over 100 years ago?

Large portions of Nebraska and Adams County were settled uniformly under the Homestead Act, and small school districts were established to provide schools for the children of these early settlers.<sup>91</sup> Local property

tax was the main source of funding for these school districts, and a tradition of local control with local financing was established and continued for sixty to eighty years for a large number of districts. Decreases in population and the resulting decline in enrollment produced a relatively high property valuation per student and allowed a school to be operated or to contract for education with a low mill levy.<sup>92</sup> The School District Reorganization Act of 1949 provided no financial incentive for reorganization and did not make reorganization mandatory. Initiative for reorganization and the development of reorganization plans had to come from the local area through the county reorganization committee. The process of developing plans of reorganization, holding hearings, submitting the plan to the state committee, and finally holding a special election was very time consuming.

The State Department of Education and the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts did not seem to recognize the importance of the long tradition of local control and operation of small Class I schools for the people of Nebraska and Adams County. The recommendation of the School Advisory Service in 1964 that Adams County should organize as one large K-12 district did not take into account the effect this would have on taxes or control over school operations for people in the rural areas.<sup>93</sup>

Other educational traditions, such as the Free High School Tuition Law, tended to slow consolidation. Residents in Class I schools in rural areas would not only be paying higher taxes if they consolidated with a high school district but would lose the choice of sending their children to the high school they preferred. The Free High School Tuition Law allowed Class I districts like District 11R, Holstein, to operate elementary schools only and still be able to meet the educational needs of high school students in the district. The declining population in small towns caused citizens to be reluc-

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tant to become part of school district reorganization plans that did not involve the building of a new school in their town.

Political opposition to consolidation was effectively organized by groups such as the Nebraska School Improvement Association. This organization actively supported the existence of Class I schools in the state and Adams County, and worked to limit consolidation legislation in the Nebraska legislature.<sup>94</sup>

In the forty years from 1949 to 1989 the members of the Adams County Reorganization Committee had to deal with the factors mentioned above as they worked to reorganize the school districts in a way that would meet educational goals, state law, and the will of the people.

The Reorganization of School Districts Act of 1949 itself had features that slowed consolidation. Reorganization was not mandatory, and the county

committees established by the act were free to develop plans of reorganization that suited the residents of the county. These factors help to account for the ongoing debate over the structure and financing of Nebraska's public school system.

### NOTES

This is a summary of a larger work submitted to Joseph Kyle in fulfillment of the requirements of History 681, Topic Seminar, Hastings College. A copy of the larger work is on deposit with the Adams County Historical Society. A summary of the larger paper was presented at the Phi Alpha Theta regional convention April 7, 1990, at the University of Nebraska.

<sup>1</sup>The essay was reprinted in Frederick C. Luebke, "Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History," *Nebraska History* 69(Winter 1988):159.

<sup>2</sup>F. E. Henzlik and Leslie L. Chisholm, "Major Educational Problems in Nebraska: An Adequate School Finance Program," *Nebraska Educational Journal*, 28(Feb. 1948):44.

<sup>3</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1989.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph M. Scalzo, "Local Control: A Myth?," *News and Views*, June 27, 1989. School/Business Newsletter, Hastings Public Schools, 1.

<sup>5</sup>Leslie L. Chisholm and F. E. Henzlik, "Major

Educational Problems in Nebraska: School District Reorganization," *Nebraska Educational Journal*, 28(Mar. 1948):66.

<sup>6</sup>Geraldine J. Scott, Paul M. Dunn, *Statistics of State School Systems 1973-74* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 27.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>8</sup>Nebraska Department of Education, *Nebraska Education Directory 1988-89* (Lincoln: Department of Education, 1989), 141-57.

<sup>9</sup>Ralph D. Purdy, ed., *Guidelines for School District Organization: A Project Report* (Lincoln, Nebraska: State Department of Education, 1968), 38.

<sup>10</sup>Howard W. Caldwell, *Education in Nebraska* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 249.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Kenton Beggs, "Frontier Education in Nebraska," (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1939), 1 passim.

<sup>12</sup>Graduate School of Education of the University of Nebraska, *The Rural Teacher of Nebraska* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 14.

<sup>13</sup>Henzlik and Chisholm, "School Finance," 44.

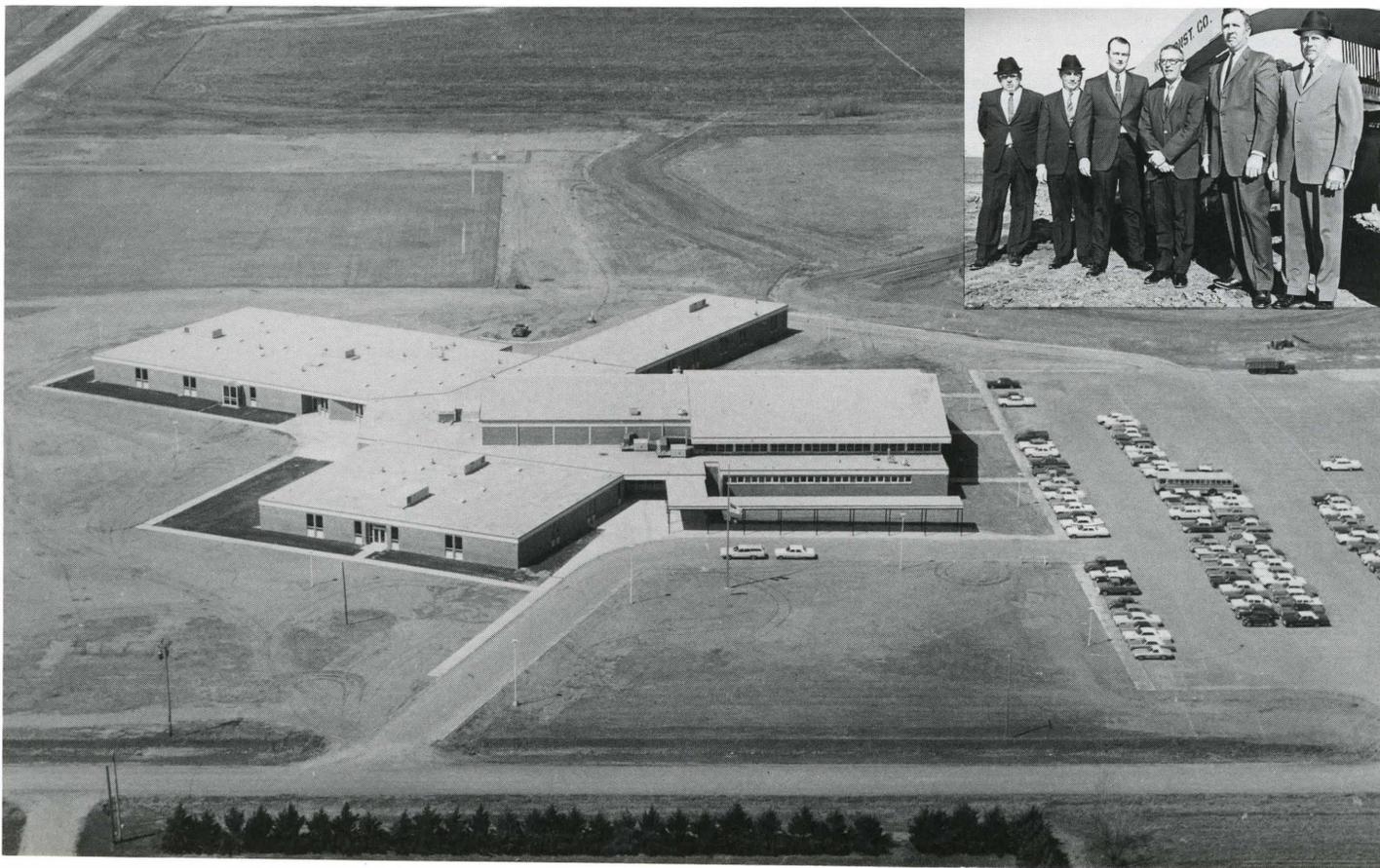
<sup>14</sup>Dave Howe, "School Lands: Keep 'em or Sell 'em" *Nebraska Farmer*, Nov. 4, 1989, 10.

<sup>15</sup>William R. Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska* (Lincoln: The Great Plains School District Organization Project, 1968), 1.

<sup>16</sup>D. F. Bergman, "Nebraska School Districts: A Historical Perspective," *Catalyst* (May 1978), 4.

<sup>17</sup>Richard E. Dudley, "Nebraska Public School

Adams Central Junior-Senior High School, April 11, 1969 . . . (inset) Groundbreaking ceremonies November 11, 1967: school superintendent Orwin White (left); school board members Ray Asmus, Glen Daugherty, Fred Halloran, Raymond Grothen, and Lloyd Wright. Both photos courtesy of Hastings Tribune.



Education 1890-1910," *Nebraska History*, 54(Spring 1973):76.

<sup>18</sup>See unpublished manuscript by Karen Svoboda, "Soiled Doves," Adams County Historical Society, Hastings Museum, Hastings, Nebraska, 25.

<sup>19</sup>James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 337.

<sup>20</sup>Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska*, 1.

<sup>21</sup>Scalzo, "Local Control: A Myth?", 1.

<sup>22</sup>Glen Larsen, interview with author, Nov. 27, 1989. See also Dudley, "Nebraska Public School Education 1840-1910," 84, 85.

<sup>23</sup>Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska*, 5-6.

<sup>24</sup>Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska, The Land and the People*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 895-96.

<sup>25</sup>Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska*, 7.

<sup>26</sup>F. E. Henzlik and Leslie L. Chisholm, *Nebraska Looks at Her School Districts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1948), 13.

<sup>27</sup>Chisholm and Henzlik, "School District Reorganization," 65.

<sup>28</sup>Henzlik and Chisholm, *Nebraska Looks at Her School Districts*, 3, 12.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup>Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska*, 7.

The full names for the committees established by the Reorganization of School Districts Act of 1949 were the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts and the County Committees for the Reorganization of School Districts. The statutes stated that these committees were to be known as the state committee and the county committee, and these were the terms usually used in the wording of the law and in correspondence. The author used the terms "Adams County Reorganization Committee" and "county committee" interchangeably.

<sup>31</sup>Shubert Herman Wolfe, "Comprehensive Planning by County School District Reorganization Committees in Nebraska, 1955-63" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1964), 25.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>33</sup>Nebraska State Department of Education, *School District Organization 1949-1962 Progress Report* (Lincoln: Division of Instructional Services, 1962).

<sup>34</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, July 23, 1966.

<sup>35</sup>*Nebraska School Laws 1987*, 179. Class II districts were those with a population of 1,000 inhabitants or less that maintained both elementary and high school grades; Class III had populations of more than 1,000 and less than 100,000 with both elementary and high school grades;

Class IV had 100,000 to 200,000 inhabitants and maintained both elementary and high school grades; and Class V districts had populations of 200,000 or more that maintained both elementary and high school grades. Class I districts maintained only elementary grades. Class VI districts maintained only high school grades. (*School Laws of Nebraska 1987*, 161-62.)

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>37</sup>Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Adams County: A Story of the Great Plains* (Hastings: Adams County-Hastings Centennial Commission, 1972), 507-11.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 507-50.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel Snyder, unpublished manuscript, Adams County Historical Society.

<sup>41</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, Oct. 2, 1948, 1.

<sup>42</sup>Ida Blomenkamp to Eldon Cunningham, Jan. 24, 1950, A.C.R.C. Files, Adams County, Nebraska (hereafter A.C.R.C. Files).

<sup>43</sup>A.C.R.C., "Annual Report to the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts for 1949," A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>44</sup>A.C.R.C. to the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts, Sept. 1, 1953, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>45</sup>A.C.R.C., Transcript of Public Hearing held at Kenesaw, Nebraska, Jan. 6, 1953, A.C.R.C. Files, 27-28.

<sup>46</sup>A.C.R.C. to the State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts, Sept. 1, 1953, A.C.R.C. Files. Creigh, *Adams County*, 514.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 517.

<sup>48</sup>Wenona Harris to State Director of Reorganization, Apr. 16, 1957, A.C.R.C. Files. *Hastings Tribune*, Mar. 4, 1958.

<sup>49</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, Mar. 4, 1958.

<sup>50</sup>A.C.R.C., Minutes, Feb. 10, 1958, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1958.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, Mar. 9, 1959.

<sup>53</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, Mar. 24, 1959.

<sup>54</sup>Wolfe, "Comprehensive Planning," 91.

<sup>55</sup>Dr. Dwayne Strasheim, interview at Hastings College by author, Sept. 14, 1989.

<sup>56</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1963, 11.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1963, 12.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 5, 1963, 11.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1963.

<sup>60</sup>Merlyn Lay, interview by author, Dec. 7, 1989.

<sup>61</sup>*Nebraska School Law 1987*, 279-81.

<sup>62</sup>Adams County Citizens Committee, Minutes, Feb. 6, 1964, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 28, 1964.

<sup>64</sup>A.C.R.C., Minutes, May 14, 1964, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>65</sup>Merle Stoneman and David Hutcheson, directors, *The Adams County School District Reorganization Study Report of July 16, 1964* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University Extension Service, 1964), 1.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 24, 25.

<sup>68</sup>David Hutcheson to Wenona Harris, Sept. 15, 1965, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, Oct. 28, 1965; Nov. 18, 1965.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 3, 1966.

<sup>71</sup>Alan Plantz, interview by author, Nov. 27, 1989.

<sup>72</sup>A.C.R.C., Minutes, Feb. 17, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 22, 1966.

<sup>74</sup>A.C.R.C., Transcript of Public Hearing held at Pauline, Nebraska, Mar. 14, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>75</sup>A.C.R.C., Transcript of Public Hearing held at Hastings, Nebraska, Mar. 21, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>76</sup>Richard Short to Wenona Harris, Apr. 14, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>77</sup>Creigh, *Adams County*, 296.

<sup>78</sup>H. C. Ebmeier to Wenona Harris, May 4, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>79</sup>A.C.R.C., Minutes, May 23, 1966, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>80</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, June 15, 1966.

<sup>81</sup>Creigh, *Adams County*, 296.

<sup>82</sup>*Hastings Tribune*, July 19, 22, 26, 1966.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, July 27, 28, 1966.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, July 30, 1966.

<sup>85</sup>Creigh, *Adams County*, 297.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup>A.C.R.C., Minutes, Feb. 18, 1970, A.C.R.C. Files.

<sup>89</sup>Glen Larsen, interview by author, Nov. 27, 1989.

<sup>90</sup>Adams County Superintendent of Schools, "Adams County Directory 1989-1990" (Adams County, Nebraska, 1989).

<sup>91</sup>Schroeder, *Project Report for Nebraska*, 2-3.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup>Stoneman and Hutcheson, *Adams County School District Reorganization Study Report of July 16, 1964*.

<sup>94</sup>Rick Baum, Field Services Director, Nebraska School Improvement Association, phone conversation with author, Nov. 1, 1989.