

**Location, Location, Location:
The Placement of Restored Country Schools
With Implications for Their Longevity**

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Betty Brennan reported that 850 million people visited museums in 2015, 55 million of whom were in school groups. These numbers are large, but as Brennan suggests, the only group of people who are expanding the number of museum visits are those aged sixty-five and up.* To increase the likelihood that people will continue to visit restored country schools, museum leaders need to develop strategies to build and cultivate community engagement, especially among persons who are not yet elderly. A number of factors are at play in building support. This study explores a country school's location as well as other factors in its longevity.

—Ed.

Introduction

In the late 1990s, a retired dean at Northern Illinois University donated the Milan Township One-room School to the Blackwell History of Education Museum in the College of Education. The gift was inspired by the desire to restore the school as a monument to public education for children in rural northern Illinois. An inspection of the building, located eleven miles from the university, revealed that it was deteriorating badly. The floors had holes and were cluttered with debris, the walls and ceiling had water damage, and the windows needed new panes. Over

several years, groups—some associated with the university and others tied to local agricultural and business communities—raised 125,000 dollars, the cost of the restoration.¹

A question arose about the school's location. Should it remain on farmland miles from major highways or be moved to a field near the College of Education? This concern may seem trivial, but such a decision should be carefully investigated. For the purposes of this study, a country school is a small building (one or two rooms) where basic subjects are taught to local children in grades one through eight. Researcher Mark Dewalt has estimated that over 2,300 of these structures are operating as schools today in the U. S. and Canada.² The number of restored country schools is yet to be determined. If a paid or volunteer curator of a restored school collects, cares for, interprets, and displays historical objects to educate the public, the building is more than a schoolhouse—it is a museum, even if “museum” is not a part of its name.

During their history, country schools often had several names. In Iowa, each school had an official name according to the township in which it was located and the number of its location within that township. For example, in government documents, Richland Township No. 1 School was in Richland Township in Sac County, No. 1 indicating its location within the township.³ Local residents also used one or more unofficial names, such as Willow Tree School. In 1901, the State of Iowa had a total of 12,623 operating country schools, most of which were closed by the 1960s. Today, the state has 220 historic country schools. Many enthusiastic communities were inspired to restore these school buildings for the 1996 celebration of 150 years of statehood. Today, some of these schools are well maintained and have popular programs. Others are largely ignored.

This article draws on Sandra Host's research of country school museums in Iowa⁴ and the experiences of a sample of local volunteer preservationists who were asked to reflect on their placement decisions. What were their reasons for placing the school in its current location, and what advice would they give to a preservation group reflecting on where a restored school should sit? In most of Iowa, one-room schools were small, mobile wood structures located on isolated farmland near a dirt road. As we argue in this paper, a major decision a group of preservationists should address is the school's placement. Only when schools are built of brick or limestone, like a few in eastern Iowa and many in the eastern U. S., is a placement decision easy to make. The expense and effort of moving a brick or stone structure is usually too great and impractical for a group of local volunteers. Restored school locations vary as do the reasons why they were

chosen. Sandra Host has assigned to the following placement categories (largest number of school museums to smallest, the percentages being rounded off):

Locations of Iowa Historic Country Schools 2014		
Type of Location	Number	Percent
Historic park/village grouping	101	46 %
Town or city land	42	19 %
Private, rural area	27	12 %
Fairgrounds	21	10 %
County or conservation park	19	9 %
Educational campus	<u>10</u>	<u>5 %</u>
	220	100 %

Figure 1: Number and percent of Iowa’s historic country schools and where they are located, rounded to nearest percent.⁵

These categories will be used to explore the reasons sites were selected and the perceived consequences of the decisions. The study is preliminary. It is hoped that it will generate more discussion about the role of a historic building’s placement with implications for the school’s longevity. A photo of each representative school museum is found in the Appendix.

Historic Park or Village

Iowa school preservationists have chosen to place country school museums in historic parks (also called historic villages) more often than in any other location. As Figure 1 indicates, 101 of 220 (46 percent) of these buildings are located in historic parks.⁶ According to William Sherman, a leading Iowa preservationist, the state’s historic parks are most often found in small towns or county seats, but some are in rural areas. They have defined boundaries and are managed by specific organizations, including in some cases the City Council.⁷ Historical parks/villages can be called “groupings of historical buildings” since the school is part of a larger group of buildings with defined boundaries that are quite secure, regardless of ownership. A historical park is a place where visitors go to view and discuss historical objects, buildings, and events.

A good example of a school being moved to an historical park is Willow Tree School that is located in Odebolt Heritage Square Park. Odebolt, a town in Sac County, northwest Iowa, has around one thousand residents.⁸ It is located just south of State Highway 20, one of only two major highways going west and east across Iowa. Odebolt has restored a Victorian-style one-room school that now houses the Iowa Rural Schools Museum of Odebolt with thousands of school artifacts, pictures, and books designed to tell the story of the rural school system and the role of Iowa's 12,623 one-room schools in the state's agricultural development. It sets Iowa's one-room schools in their historical context and student culture, and it tells why these schools were so successful. The inspiration for the project was the work of Host, who hoped to teach future generations the story of Iowa's farm settlement, including the role of its one-room schools.⁹ Host began her research by interviewing descendants of the twelve families who built and those (including herself) who attended one-room Willow Tree School. Her book *The Iowa Rural School System (1858-1966)—A Lost Treasure*¹⁰ inspired a farming couple, Curtis Raasch, and his wife, Carol, to lead an effort to restore Willow Tree School, located on their farm a half mile east of the school's original location five miles from Odebolt.

Curtis and Carol Raasch gathered forty people to form the Odebolt Rural Legacy Project. Their goal was to move the school—built in 1883 and closed in 1951—to Odebolt, restore it, and use it as a museum. They formed the Rural Legacy Project Board (RLPB) and researched four possible placement actions:

- Buy an acre of land and move the school back to its original location.
- Move the school to an 86-acre county park on the Raccoon River in Sac County.
- Place the school in the Moorhead County Park in Ida County next to another country school.
- Locate the school in a new downtown park in Odebolt.¹¹

Important factors the RLPB discussed were the need for building security, easy access to the museum, and the ability of the RLPB to raise funds for the restoration and future maintenance of the school. Moving the school to Odebolt's downtown park was the unanimous choice of the RLPB. Next, in 2011, the RLPB approached Odebolt's town officials for approval of the project under the city's nonprofit 501c3 status. The city's leaders expressed three major concerns:

- Is there widespread support for this project?
- Are enough resources available to privately fund the project?

- After the historical restoration is complete, will the RLPB be able to raise enough funds to cover future maintenance costs?¹²

The RLPB, in demonstrating widespread support for the project, said that the original estimate for the restoration was 60,000 dollars, but within three years the group had raised around 100,000 dollars to cover all restoration costs.¹³ The group reported that this amount did not include the thousands of hours of time and service donated by many volunteers, including the moving of the school and the advice of a restoration architect. The RLPB also said that volunteers had donated time, materials, and skills to curate the museum's classroom and entry furnishings, research library, signage, security cases, and collections. They reported that residents in the area had donated over a thousand school artifacts and over a thousand books. Some volunteers, mainly retired teachers, worked on programs for school children, special events like the annual Odebolt Creek Days, and Christmas celebrations.¹⁴

Given the obvious support of the Odebolt community, the city's leaders agreed to receive the donation of the school and support the restoration project. They were willing to accept some ongoing costs, including the maintenance of the park grounds and the museum's electricity, internet costs, insurance, and taxes. These actions led to even more changes. The city's leaders moved one of the town's oldest homes, the Peterson Pioneer Home, to the historic park. The building had been donated to the city years ago and maintained by a group called the Questors, but it was not being visited. The downtown area already had the Odebolt Historical Museum and the restored Adams National Bank. The restored German Farmers Bank, the Veterans Memorial Area, and a restored community center were across the street from the park maintained by the Odebolt Betterment Committee. In 2014, the City Council named its collection of historic buildings and lands the Odebolt Heritage Square Park. In 2015, the RLPB built an outdoor classroom with a concrete floor, roof, and long wooden benches as a comfortable, all-weather meeting space for residents, tourists, and especially bus groups visiting the park.¹⁵

The story of Willow Tree School's move to a historic park is emblematic of nearly half of all the restored schools in Iowa. First was the need to attract a core group of people with a deep commitment to the project. Given the small size of Odebolt, the involvement of forty individuals as well as the generous contributions of many others was solid evidence that the project had widespread support. Second was the ongoing contribution of the Odebolt City Council, and third was the school's placement with several other historic structures in a park that gives it security as

well as more areas of historical interest and exposure. Locally it has attracted the involvement of the schools and class visits by children. Many area groups such as homeschoolers, historical groups, and returning alumni families visit throughout the year.¹⁶

The Willow Tree School Museum has had an auspicious beginning. Since most of the residents of Odebolt are descendants of the original farm families who built and attended one-room schools, it is likely that local residents will remain strong advocates and care for the Heritage Park buildings including the school museum. It remains to be seen whether the community, local schools, and tourists will continue to provide the museum with sufficient patronage and resources for many years to come.

Town or City Land

A second location that is frequently chosen for a restored country school is the public land in a town or city. In the most general terms, a town is a thickly settled area that is larger than a village but smaller than a city. How these settlements are defined varies greatly from one state to another. Whatever the definitions, the area in question is governed and funded, in whole or part, by the City Council. The inclusion of a park provides residents with low- or no-cost ways to enjoy the outdoors and remain physically active. If the park is well maintained, it can also contribute to the public perception that the town or city is a place where residents want to live.¹⁷ Often a park includes shelter houses, camping sites, athletic fields, and bodies of water. It may also include a single historic schoolhouse. Such a structure may be located in a variety of places within city limits such as near another historical building, park, museum, courthouse, cemetery, railroad tracks, or unused land. Many of these places may have lengthy histories, but the public does not generally view them as historic because they are used for everyday purposes and, in the case of cemeteries, as repositories for the dead. Figure 1 indicates that 42 of 220 (19 percent) of respondents elected to place a historic country school on town or city lands.

Brush College Schoolhouse, also called Madison Township No. 5, is in the town of Murray in Clarke County, Iowa. Murray, located in the southcentral part of the state, has a population of around 740. Its school, built in 1875 five miles north of Murray on Route 15, closed in 1952 but was used as a voting place until the 1990s when it reverted back to the farm family that had originally owned it. A group of volunteers named Murray Community Resource Development

(MCRD) took on the tasks of restoring the school and preparing it for a move into Murray. Contributors to the project included the mayor, individuals, businesses, and volunteer groups.¹⁸

The MCRD, a non-profit 501c3 organization, identified sites where the school might be located. They ruled out the town park, thinking its distance from the downtown area might lead to vandalism. Instead, they chose to place the school, along with the log cabin built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Depression era, in a small, bricked area near downtown, five blocks from the public school. They finished the move and restoration in 1996 after the family had donated the schoolhouse to the City, and the City had agreed to pay its taxes, insurance, and electricity bills. The MCRD agreed to maintain the building, which they have continued to do. Today, they open the school for annual special events such as Mormon Trail Days and Murray Jamboree.¹⁹

When asked what advice she would give to anyone wondering where to place a restored school, Mary Klein, a leader in the MCRD, stated that security is the paramount consideration. Secondly, she said, is the issue of ongoing maintenance of the schoolhouse. People may enthusiastically donate to a restoration project, she said, but they are less likely to make a donation for the continuing upkeep of the building.²⁰

Taking care of the community is a major theme of life in Murray. Some volunteers are docents or general helpers, and eight to ten people serve on the MCRD, which meets only when a need arises. These volunteers are perhaps the core of the community served by the restored country school; yet, according to Mary Klein, Brush College School is only one of many ongoing town improvement projects, such as painting the tennis courts, planting trees, and installing restrooms for park visitors.²¹

Children and teenagers in Murray are taught to take responsibility for their town, including its restored country school. Every year, the school is the site of instruction for fifty to seventy-five pre-kindergarteners and fifth and sixth graders who walk five blocks from the public school for activities in the historic structures. Schoolchildren are encouraged to serve their community through hands-on projects, some of which are completed in the schoolhouse. High school students who finish two hundred hours of community service receive a silver cord to wear over their graduation robes. Junior high and younger students who finish fifty hours of service receive a bronze cord.²² Moving the school to a secure, accessible location in downtown Murray has

contributed to the school's continuing connection with the community and has also provided meaningful local historical activities for younger generations.

Private Rural Area

At one time, American children traveled unpaved roads to over two hundred thousand country schools.²³ Eventually, most of the schools closed due to the movement to abandon one-room schools and build consolidated schools. Many schoolhouses were repurposed as storage facilities, homes, or businesses. A number were left standing in their original rural locations until they collapsed, were vandalized, or were torn down. Most school districts auctioned off the structure and furnishings when a school closed. They returned the acre of farmland on which the school sat to the farm family that had donated it to the school district. The titles of a few schools and their acre of land were retained by local school districts. Of the 220 schools in Sandra Host's study of standing historic Iowa country schools, 27 (12 percent) are in rural areas, either in their original rural locations or in private homesteads to be used for farm purposes.²⁴

A school currently being restored in Scott County just west of the Mississippi River is Forest Grove School. Established in 1873, rebuilt in 1923, and closed in 1957, the school is located just outside the current city limits of Bettendorf, a city of around 35,000 people.²⁵ The school and the acre of land where the school was originally located are part of the farmland that the Blunk family has owned for over one hundred years. Despite the crumbling condition of the school, many people in the Quad-Cities area seem to consider Forest Grove School an iconic landmark, according to restoration volunteer Sharon Andresen. The school sits on a well-traveled road with new housing developments in every direction.²⁶

Passing by the schoolhouse, Sharon Andresen, a resident of Bettendorf, stopped at the Blunk farm to ask if she could buy the school and restore it. The family refused, so she asked if they would like to retain ownership while she restored the school. They agreed, saying that many people had asked if they could restore the school, but she was the only one who was willing to do that and not buy the building or land. Andresen began the restoration project by establishing a 501c3 non-profit corporation called Forest Grove School Preservation (FGSP), which raised funds through direct appeals, car washes, trivia nights, grants, the community fundraising program of the John Deere Classic golf tournament, etc. To date, cash and in-kind donations

have amounted to around 100,000 dollars, and Sharon Andresen believes the FGSP will need 100,000 more to finish the project.²⁷

In response to the rapid spread of housing developments, the city set aside a hundred acres for a city park and a new elementary school less than a mile from the restoration project. City officials offered to accept the donation of the Forest Grove School and allow it to be moved into the city park, but the family and FGSP wanted the school to remain where its educational history had occurred. Another factor was that Forest Grove School was rebuilt in 1923 with a basement. Original schools built in 1800s did not have basements, but they were common in schools built in the 1900s. The first major effort to stabilize Forest Grove's structure was to build a new basement, foundation, and supports for the old school. Having this work completed at its original location made moving to the city park very problematic. In 2014, the Blunk family, with help from project members, nominated the schoolhouse for the National Register of Historical Places (NRHP) designation, which was approved in 2014.²⁸

The FGSP has become the center of an emerging community of volunteer workers, enthusiasts, and financial supporters. The group has interviewed former students and teachers who told stories about the school and thus brought life back to the building. When the FGSP finishes the project, it plans for the school to serve as a country school museum telling the story of farming and rural education worldwide. Andresen said that the school will be open to small groups (e.g., scouts, 4-H groups, book clubs, etc.) for meetings and other gatherings, including seasonal activities. The FGSP also hopes to have third and fourth grade students come to the school to reenact a day of learning in the 1920s, the period of significance for the restoration.²⁹

There are several reasons the placement of Forest Grove School is likely to contribute to the school's longevity. First, it is highly visible from a main highway. Second, it is near public schools whose students may visit the school without having to ride long distances on buses. Third, Bettendorf has a high proportion of residents with college degrees (38.8 percent), which is 50 percent higher than the national average. Housing developments are extending the city and changing land prices. Bettendorf is recognized as a good place to live based on affordability of homes, green spaces, schools, and a "giving" spirit.³⁰ This prosperous, well-educated community will probably continue to care for Forest Grove School. Currently the Blunk family and the FGSP have a strong relationship. It is hoped that this partnership will continue.

Fairgrounds

After the Civil War, business leaders wanted fairs to be annual events. Thus, they bought land and held hugely successful interstate fairs where people could buy and sell cattle and agricultural equipment; and demonstrate culinary arts, needlework, and other skills. Today, fairs are numerous, and they often include hundreds of exhibitors and animals, entertainers, horse races, carnival rides, artisans, craftsmen, food vendors, etc. In Iowa, rural youth who are 4-H club members are major exhibitors for a wide range of projects (for example, livestock, vegetables, sewing, and baking). The county fair winners compete at the Iowa State Fair. Some of these fairs also showcase country schools.³¹ Of the 220 schools in Sandra Host's study of historic country schools, 21 (or 10 percent) are located on fairgrounds.³²

In 1877 Greene County had 141 country schools. Minnihan School (also called Bristol Township No. 7) is one of the last three to survive. The school, built in 1874 on land donated by Patrick Minnihan, was closed in 1959. Today, it is a preserved schoolhouse on the fairgrounds of the Greene County Fair Association (GCFA) in Jefferson, a town of around 4,300 people in the central portion of Iowa.³³ The school became the property of the GCFA in 1967 when a grandson of Patrick Minnihan purchased and donated the building to a non-profit, volunteer-managed community association called the Greene County Historical Society (GCHS).³⁴ The GCHS donated the schoolhouse to the fair association, which moved the school from its original location to the fairgrounds. Roger Aegerter, director of the GCHS, stated that land prices and usage prevented the GCHS from moving the school. He also said that the fairgrounds were selected because of the availability of space and visibility. Everyone passing by on Highway 30, one of the busiest roads in town, can see the schoolhouse.

During the annual Greene County Fair, volunteers open the school for three days. A docent dressed in period clothing plays the role of the teacher who gives tours, answers questions, and conducts classes typical of the 1880s. According to Roger Aegerter, she knows the history of the area and interprets the building to resemble country schooling in the 1880s. The building is furnished with objects that were typical of schoolhouses at that time.³⁵ During the school year, the GCHS also conducts tours of the school for local elementary school groups.

Minnihan School did not need much restoration when it was donated to the GCHS in 1967. The only costs were its foundation materials and labor, both of which were donated. The most recent repairs were in 1995. A building-and-grounds committee usually inspects the school early

in June before the county fair. They have determined that the building needs to be painted and the chimney has a leak. Window frames and the front porch need to be repaired, and two front screen doors and main doors are breaking apart. Presently the roof is also in need of repair. As volunteers take on these tasks, they are instructed to be careful to research and maintain the school's original façade. The GCHS hopes to finish the restoration before the next county fair.³⁶

Reflecting on his experience as director of the GCHS, Roger Aegerter said that if a group is considering moving a historic school to fairgrounds, they should try to place the school near other attractions, not on the edge of the grounds where people are less likely to walk. Minnihan School is located next to a big metal building full of agricultural artifacts, and visitors usually walk through this building and then to the school. Aegerter stated further that preservationists should determine whether the building is in good enough shape to be moved or they might spend a great deal of time and money bringing the building back to its original condition.³⁷

County or Conservation Park

Conservation parks in Iowa are county parks usually with either "county" or "conservation" in their names. They are outside city limits and are run and funded by county boards. Each county can have several parks, which are usually visited by people who want to enjoy the outdoors and engage in recreational activities such as hunting, camping, fishing, and boating. Park visitors also participate in educational programs such as archeological day camps. In her study of 220 historic country schoolhouses, Sandra Host found nineteen (9 percent) in county parks.³⁸

Abbe Creek School Museum, in the Linn County Conservation Park System, is a one-room schoolhouse in eastern Iowa located on Highway E48 one mile west of Mount Vernon, a town of around 4,600 residents.³⁹ The school has a very long history that began before Iowa became a state. In 1844, pioneer homesteaders in Linn County organized Sumner School and had a log schoolhouse built. In 1856, a new brick school was built to replace the log school and was called Kepler School or "Little Brick." Little Brick is believed to be the oldest one-room brick schoolhouse in the state. William Abbe was the first white pioneer landowner in the county, and in his honor the school's name was changed to Abbe Creek School. In 1936, the school closed and the building was repurposed as a private home. Twenty-eight years later, the Pitlik family purchased the schoolhouse and yard, and in 1964 the restored schoolhouse was donated to the county as a museum. Since that time, the Linn County Conservation Board (LCCB) has managed

the Abbe Creek School Museum.⁴⁰ The schoolhouse is on a little more than an acre of natural park land with limited parking.

Maintaining community support for the school is in the hands of designated board members who work with a dozen volunteers, many of whom belong to a group called the Abbe Creek Clusters. This group helps with school programs and has been a strong voice for continued attention to and maintenance of the Abbe Creek School. It coordinates with a local historical society that has an office staff responsible for arranging individual tours by appointment. A retired schoolteacher has developed plans for those who visit on the first and third Sunday afternoons in June, July, and August, when the schoolhouse is open to the public. The usual visitors are school groups, youth clubs, and people who happen by the building and see that it is open. From time to time, day camps are also held in the museum. It is the only one-room school in Iowa that maintains a storm shelter and has the children practice tornado drills.⁴¹

Abbe Creek School recently had major restoration that the Linn County Conservation Board funded and completed. The choice to restore the school at a large cost is a testament to the strength of the Conservation Board, whose holdings require maintenance of more than one hundred miles of trails, 27 areas, 320 campsites, an observatory, a learning center, a shooting range, an arboretum, and a watercraft rental facility. The schoolhouse has a predictable stream of public funding and also has the assistance of county staff in other departments (such as a carpenter), grants, in-kind gifts, and volunteer service. Many other school museums must raise most or all of the money to meet their needs.⁴²

Abbe Creek is fortunate to be located on a hill near a route with a long history. It is in an area that has a community with a proven record of preserving history, as reflected in its restored buildings and celebrations. Several community groups and the Lynn County Conservation Board work closely to provide funds and maintain the schoolhouse. Abbe Creek is the best example in Iowa of an early settlement brick school with two windows on each side of the classroom. When the state initiated the public rural school system, Abbe Creek continued to be used as a rural school. Although the school was established in 1844 and rebuilt in 1856, it operated as a school for 92 years. To tell its story, trained docents are available for guided tours. With the demonstrated cooperation between a city and a county conservation board, this school is likely to stay on its original site for many years. It is highly visible, secure, and accessible due to its geography, brick construction, and proximity to Mt. Vernon.

Educational Campus

A few restored schools are located on the grounds of functioning schools. For example, researchers Conley and Dewalt found, in a national study, thirty-eight colleges and universities with historic country schools on their campuses.⁴³ Figure 1 indicates that out of all 220 historic country schools in Iowa, 10 (5 percent) are located on some kind of educational campus. An example is the Marshall Center School (MCS) at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls, a city of approximately 40,000 people in the northeastern region of the state.⁴⁴

Marshall Center School was among several “mobile” public schools in Marshall Township until the 1890s. If an insufficient number of students arrived at a Marshall Township school and another district had sufficient numbers but lacked a schoolhouse, the building was put on skids and moved. Sometimes the move was made without the knowledge of the superintendent. If he objected, the school board had to move the school back to its original location. In the 1890s, the population of Marshall Township was large enough that the township’s schoolhouses were considered permanent; thus, they were spaced throughout the township. Each township had a maximum of nine schools. Each township had thirty-six square sections (miles). A school was near the center of every four square miles of farmland. This arrangement was common across growing townships in Iowa while farm settlement was occurring.⁴⁵

Marshall Center School No. 5 was built in 1893. Until 1944, it was located three miles north of Highway 3 on County Road N28 near Laurens, Pocahontas County.⁴⁶ As a Township No. 5 school, it was also known as a “center” school because it served local families living within the four-square-mile area in the center of the township. Most center schools also served as township voting locations. In many cases they continued to serve in this capacity for some time after schools closed as educational institutions.

In the year of the closure of Marshall Center School (1986), Constantine Curris, president of UNI, appointed a committee of five to identify a historic one-room school that typified the history of rural education in Iowa.⁴⁷ This schoolhouse would serve as a symbol of the fulfillment of the university’s mission to train future teachers. The criteria for selection were as follows:

- The school had to be located in the site where it had served as a public elementary school;

- It had to have a carefully documented history;
- The building had to have the architectural style and design of its era and region;
- The school had to be used by the university community without charge;
- The building had to be structurally sound, needing only minimal restoration; and
- The school should have a connection to the university (if possible).

The selection committee, after reviewing fifty nominations, selected MCS as the best representative school.⁴⁸ Bernice and Alvin Lindquist donated the school to the university, and in 1987 the building was moved to the campus near the Schindler Education Center.

Oversight of the school shifted over the years. It was moved from the College of Education in 1987 to the UNI Museums in 1996, and then to the Rodd Library in 2012.⁴⁹ Some funds from the university's budget and foundation accounts were used for maintenance and staffing purposes. Presently, the faculty, staff, and interns of Rodd Library interpret MCS to resemble schooling in the 1920s. The building is used by classes in the College of Education, local school groups, and scout groups.⁵⁰

The story of Marshall Center School's move from Marshall Township to three different departments in the university represents an important challenge of establishing a historic country school on an educational campus. Unlike other projects, this one lacked the support of a deeply committed local group. Only one person, President Curris, made the decision to move the historic school to the UNI campus. Rather than soliciting the help of many alumni and local groups to move the project forward, he asked for the help of only five individuals: two university administrators, two alumni, and one journalist. It is not clear whether any of them had a deep commitment to the restoration project.

Schools at all levels strive to prepare students for a lifetime of family, career, and volunteer activities. The few campuses with a restored country school (10 of 220 or 5 percent)⁵¹ have additional challenges as well, including preserving the country school, interpreting its history, developing programs for visitors, training docents, and building communities of support. Given the complexity of the mission of MCS and the small size of the group making the initial decisions, it is perhaps inevitable that MCS has had shifting oversight and funding difficulties. For more consistent oversight and funding, we suggest that MCS and other historic schools on education campuses build partnerships with advocacy groups (for example, alumni, retired

teachers' organizations, and historical/genealogical societies). Presently, Katherine Martin, associate professor of library science and head of resource management, has assembled a group to move the MCS in a new direction. She commented, "Our museum staff is working with several instructors, providing hands-on opportunities for public history students, and hosting interns. We are fully involved in planning for a new Museum Studies Certificate."⁵² Whether that certificate will include coursework related to MCS remains to be seen.

Discussion

As was previously stated, many Iowa communities restored one-room schools for the 1996 celebration of 150 years of statehood. Today, some are well-maintained and have well-attended programs. Others are poorly maintained and are largely unused. Why did local groups decide to leave a school in place or move it when it closed as an elementary school? Discussion with a sample of volunteer preservationists suggests that a number of factors were at play: initial and ongoing costs, shared responsibility, visibility, security, and accessibility.

Initial and Ongoing Costs. Every preservation leader who participated in this study discussed the costs of restoring and maintaining a country school. For example, the group supporting Willow Tree School had recently completed the restoration of its building at a cost of 100,000 dollars. The restoration of Forest Grove School was incomplete, but its restoration group had already raised 100,000 dollars with a goal of reaching 200,000 dollars. Local historian Roger Aegerter, when asked what advice he would give a group hoping to restore a school, suggested first investigating the price of the land where a school might sit, asking about the current ownership and use of the land and its historic building, and inspecting the unrestored school carefully to estimate reconstruction costs. In these ways, the group could avoid excessive expenditures.

The evolution of Marshall Center School at UNI demonstrates funding challenges over time due to the competing goals of the university and its country school. The university has not yet developed a highly committed community of interest outside the university to support and advocate for MCS. Instead, a small, internal group made initial decisions with no apparent long-term commitment to the school. University funds were tapped to support the move of the school to campus, yet when university funding dropped, the school was at risk of being closed.

Shared Responsibility. Small museums usually lack the funds to hire staff. All but one of the six restoration groups in this study relied on at least two groups to share responsibility for their historic building. These organizations usually worked out an arrangement to share the costs like program expenses, maintenance, grounds upkeep, insurance, taxes, electricity, and in some cases internet bills; however, the owner of the land and structure has the ultimate legal responsibilities and therefore becomes the dominant partner. One of the groups must have a 501c3 status if it wants to receive generous taxfree donations when raising funds for restoration or ongoing expenses. Besides sharing financial needs, having at least two groups involved allows for more advocacy, public support, and volunteer support. A successful school museum model appears to have a public and a private entity working together, allowing for change-over of personnel and continuity so the likelihood of the museum staying relevant and existing into the future is strengthened.

Visibility. Several respondents mentioned visibility as an important factor in their schools' longevity. Visibility keeps a school museum in the public's mind and is one way to attract visitors who may be passing by. For example, the group restoring Willow Tree School moved the building from the Raasch farm to Odebolt, the latter site that is close to one of only two major highways going west and east across Iowa. This move gave the school and the other historic structures arranged nearby greater visibility than they had previously had. Visibility was also mentioned by the groups that restored or maintained Minnihan School, Forest Grove No. 5 School, Marshall Center School, and Abbe Creek School.

Security. A school's longevity is closely tied to its security. We found that the schools that were being maintained in their original rural locations near paved roads were safest when they were close to towns or cities, had security fences built around them, or had very active advocate groups living nearby. The decision to move a historic school nearly always disqualifies it from the NRHP designation. This ineligibility complicates the decision whether or not to move a rural school. The move is what often saves a school from destruction, but if it is left unsecured in an isolated setting, even with the NRHP designation, it may be vulnerable. During Sandra Host's journey across Iowa to find, photograph, and study country schools' architectural features, she discovered that in the past few years, four historic schools in isolated areas were burned or torn down even though one had the NRHP designation. Vandals burned another school in an out-of-the-way county conservation park. Aware of such threats, the group that maintains Brush

College School decided to place the building in a bricked area in downtown Murray. We suggest that the risk of a school being vandalized is lowered when it is moved near other buildings, and the museum is even safer when a community around it is vested in educating young and old alike.

Accessibility. Last and equally important is the accessibility of the schoolhouse. Given the high cost of school insurance and the financial burdens of restored schools, a preserved school should be accessible to the public, and a visit to the school should not require a trip over miles of dirt or gravel roads. If the school is difficult to access, it is likely to have maintenance problems and few if any visitors. For example, a school in Clay County is owned by a school district that is miles away from the old schoolhouse. The building had been restored and maintained by alumni neighbors who sought and received the NRHP designation many years ago. The caretakers have gradually aged and are dying, yet no one else seems willing to drive many miles on gravel roads to repair the school. In contrast, Minnihan School was moved from its original rural location to a spot in the Greene County Fairgrounds near a well-traveled road and next to a building displaying agricultural implements. This arrangement provides visitors with easy access to both the farm equipment and the restored school next door. Forest Grove School No. 5 is located on a major highway near a large city, and thus it is accessible to school groups and visitors.

Conclusion

This study explores the reasons local preservation groups have selected sites for the placement of their historic country schools and the perceived consequences of their decisions. As this study demonstrates, a placement decision involves considerably more than raising funds for the initial project. To survive, a one-room school museum usually relies on one or more organizations to operate, advocate for, and maintain the building. Factors influencing their placement decisions include shared responsibilities for the schoolhouse, visibility, security, and accessibility. We suggest that a school museum be more than a classroom. A classroom left as it was when the school closed may serve as a place where a shrinking number of alumni can reminisce, but the building needs to continue to draw visitors over time, especially younger ones. This is likely to occur if its docents tell stories about the school and celebrate the traditions begun in one-room schools to make public education free and accessible for every child,

especially those living in isolated rural areas. Its purpose should be used to connect the school to the community, students, and tourists.

One way to fulfill this purpose might be using school artifacts to tell the stories of rural settlement and cultural changes over time. Educational programs might be developed to enable visitors to reenact a day in a country school or perhaps sponsor celebrations (for example, ice cream or box socials, Victorian teas, Christmas programs, and picnics) that highlight the activities of students and their families who attended one-room schools. Each museum might tell the story of why country schools were so important to the local community's history and for the development of a democratic, educated nation.

Technology may eventually assist in this process. If a network of country schools creates a tourism venue, it might give the museums even more relevance and create new advocates for school museums of the future. Yet just as important are older generations who engage younger generations in activities designed to initiate the young into preservation projects. Preservation groups need to continue educating and recruiting individuals who have a passion for local history and a desire to ensure that stories of life in one-room schools are passed on to future generations.

Sandra Kessler Host (top photo) serves as the curator of the Iowa Rural Schools Museum of Odebolt in Odebolt, IA. She has conducted ground-breaking research with extensive use of primary documents, artifacts, and case studies of descendants of immigrant farm families, including her own, who settled in Iowa and built and attended one-room schools. She has authored four books on Iowa's country schools, most notably *Iowa Historic Schools: Highlighting Victorian Influence* (2014). She earned her degrees and teaching certifications from Simpson College, San Diego State University, and Concordia University. Contact her at SandraHost100@gmail.com.



Lucy Townsend, Ph.D. (bottom photo), retired curator of the Blackwell History of Education Museum at Northern Illinois University and professor emerita of Educational Foundations, is a charter member of the Country School Association of America. She served as executive director for seven years. She was president of the Midwest History of Education Society, president of the International Society for Educational Biography, and secretary of the American Educational Studies Association. She has published books, articles, short stories, and plays. Currently she is editor of the *Country School Journal*. Contact her at ltownsend@niu.edu.

Appendix: Six Different Types of Location for Restored Country Schools*



Heritage Park/Village
Willow Tree School in Odebolt, Sac Co.



Town or City Land
Brush College School in Murray, Clarke Co.



Private/Rural Area
Forest Grove School, near Bettendorf in Scott Co.



Fairgrounds
Minnihan School, Jefferson in Greene Co.



County/Conservation Park
Abbe Creek School near Mt. Vernon in Linn Co.



Educational Campus
Marshall Center School, Cedar Falls in Blackhawk Co.

Notes

* Photos by Sandra Kessler Host.

** Betty Brennan, “Good and Bad News for Museums and Parks and What to Do About It,” www.taylorstudios.com/good-and-bad-news-for-museums-and-parks-and-what-to-do-about-it (accessed December 5, 2015).

¹ Lucy Townsend, “Editor’s Note,” *Thresholds in Education* 27, (2001): 1.

² Mark Dewalt, “Researching Amish Country Schools: An Interview with Mark W. Dewalt,” in *More Than 200,000 Country Schools: A Guide for Research, Preservation, and Education*, ed. Lucy Townsend (League City, Texas: Country School Association of America, 2016), 36-37; Jessica Conley and Mark Dewalt, “The One Room School Goes to College” (presentation at the annual conference of the Country School Association of America, Miami University, June 2008).

³ Richland Township No. 1 School is near the center of sections 1, 2, 11, and 12 that made up School District #1.

⁴ Sandra Kessler Host, *Iowa Historic Schools Highlighting Victorian Influence: Photo Study of Architecture* (Odebolt, Iowa: Rural Legacy Project, 2014), 36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William Sherman, e-mail message to Lucy Townsend (hereafter LT), December 15, 2015.

⁸ “City of Odebolt, IA,” <http://www.odebolt.net> (accessed December 5, 2015).

⁹ The project’s mission statement is, “[We are] preserving the history of Iowa’s rural schools and instilling pride in the heritage of our community.” —Rural Legacy Project Board and approved by the City of Odebolt. This statement is on a sign by the door of the museum.

¹⁰ Sandra Kessler Host, *The Iowa Rural School System (1858-1966)—A Lost Treasure* (Odebolt, IA: Rural Legacy Project, 2012).

¹¹ Hagge Conservation Park is discussed in Carol Raasch’s presentation to RLPB, Jan. 2010.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Application that the City of Odebolt applied for and received for the Best Effort for Rural Restoration in Iowa, 2014.

¹⁴ Ibid. Host has donated the proceeds from her books written on Iowa’s rural settlement, one-room schools, and the history of the area to the RLPB. The books are an ongoing source of funding for new programs and maintenance.

¹⁵ Comments by Carol Raasch, chair of the RLPB, comments at the opening of Odebolt Creek Days, 2015.

¹⁶ Electricity provides for consistent heating, cooling, and humidity to maintain artifacts and for lighting. The internet monitors the museum's security system, provides computers for a web site, aids people in research, allows them to show videos, and provides media stations for collections and for tourists to acquire information.

¹⁷ Careers in a Parks and Recreation Department, govcareers.about.com (accessed December 10, 2015).

¹⁸ Mary Klein, phone conversation with LT, December 15, 2015 and January 13, 2016; Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 95.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Jonathan Zimmerman, *Small Wonder: The Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 17.

²⁴ Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 36.

²⁵ "The City of Bettendorf, Iowa," <http://www.bettendorf.org> (accessed December 15, 2015).

²⁶ Sharon Andresen, restoration leader, conversation with LT, December 14, 2015; Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 82.

²⁷ Andresen, phone conversation with LT, Dec. 11, 2015.

²⁸ "National Register of Historic Places," <http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/ia/state.html> (accessed December 25, 2015).

²⁹ Andresen, December 11, 2015.

³⁰ "Bettendorf, Iowa," <http://www.visitquadcities.com/content/bettendorf-iowa> (accessed December 12, 2015).

³¹ "History of State Fairgrounds," <http://www.groundsforsculpture.org/About/History-of-State-Fairgrounds> (accessed December 12, 2015).

³² Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 36.

³³ "City of Jefferson, Iowa," www.cityofjeffersoniowa.org (accessed November 10, 2015).

³⁴ Roger Aegerter, director of the Greene County Historical Society, e-mail messages to Sandra Host and LT, December 25, 30, 2015; February 15, 2016.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 36.

³⁹ “City of Mount Vernon, Iowa,” <http://www.cityofmtvernon-ia.gov> (accessed Dec. 21, 2015).

⁴⁰ “Linn: Abbe Creek School Museum,” mycountyparks.com (accessed December 21, 2015).

⁴¹ Gail Barels, Linn County naturalist, conversation with LT, December 21, 2015.

⁴² “Linn County, Iowa: Linn County Conservation,” <http://www.linncounty.org/131/Linn-County-Conservation> (accessed December 21, 2015).

⁴³ Jessica Conley and Mark Dewalt, “The One Room School Goes to College.”

⁴⁴ The population count for 2014 is 40,859, <https://suburbanstats.org/population/iowa/how-many-people-live-in-cedar-falls> (accessed December 21, 2015).

⁴⁵ Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 119.

⁴⁶ Sue Grosboll, edited and expanded by Katherine Martin, “Rural School Collections: Marshall Center School—A History,” <http://museum.library.uni.edu/ruralschool/MarshallCenter> (accessed January 6, 2016).

⁴⁷ Lisa Moore, “Wanted: Nice One-room School,” *The Northern Iowan*, March 31, 1987.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Sherry Snider, “Dedication Ceremony To Take Place Sunday,” *The Northern Iowan*, October 9, 1987, <http://web.library.uni.edu/gateway/indexuni/public/pager1?url=https://www.library.uni.edu/gateway/indexuni/ni/1987/00000252.jpg>, (accessed January 2016).

⁴⁹ Grosboll, “Rural School Collections,” <http://museum.library.uni.edu/ruralschool/MarshallCenter> (accessed January 10, 2016).

⁵⁰ “University of Northern Iowa Resources,” <http://museum.library.uni.edu/resources>, (accessed January 10, 2016).

⁵¹ Host, *Iowa Historic Schools*, 36.

⁵² Katherine Martin, head of library resources, e-mail message to LT, January 27, 2016.