Reconstructing the history of country schools can be a daunting task, as Bob Frenz discovered while researching the country schools of McHenry County, Illinois. After publishing his award-winning *Historic Country Schools of McHenry County, Il.,** he decided to embark on another project—to research the history of Wisconsin's Northwoods country schools. Following is a description of the various steps he took in preparation for writing the narrative. This article may be especially helpful to anyone who is beginning an inquiry into country schools.

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Inquiring into Northwoods Country Schools

Robert W. Frenz

This project—to research the history of Wisconsin's Northwoods country schools—involved a number of steps and the collection of various types of resources. Important initial steps were establishing the boundaries of the Northwoods and reconstructing its transformations over time. I then turned to the region's country schools, all of which I hoped to locate and visit. I unearthed Wisconsin legislative acts and mandates related to country schools, and also drew heavily on county and town histories as well as district and school record books. The latter are not readily available and most, in fact, may never be found. The towns are small and spread out, and there do not appear to be central depositories where these vital records are stored. An exception is the village of Three Lakes, where I discovered a treasure trove of Oneida County school record books. I am still poring through these. In addition, I found and studied photographs and read many issues of a local newspaper. Throughout this process, I evaluated whatever I found, followed new leads, raised questions, and filled in gaps. The project remains a work in progress, and all conclusions about the Northwoods country schools are tentative. It is hoped that persons interested in exploring country schools will learn from the processes of inquiry described in this essay.

Establishing Boundaries

First, I set about establishing the physical and human borders of the Northwoods, a task made manageable by the efforts of geography students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The students used indices as varied as soils, bedrock, mean temperatures, incomes, concentrations of Lutherans, and fishing and hunting licenses. They concluded that the Northwoods as "a distinct region" covers roughly the northern third of Michigan's lower peninsula, Michigan's entire upper peninsula, the northern third of Wisconsin, and the northeastern quadrant of Minnesota. (1) For purposes of my research on the country schools of Wisconsin's Northwoods, I decided to concentrate on three contiguous counties:

1. Iron, which borders Lake Superior;
2. Vilas, whose northern boundary is the Upper Peninsula; and
3. Oneida, the most southerly and largest of the three in both area and population.

These three counties cover an area larger (by 5/4ths) than the State of Delaware. (2)

Iron County, which, as its name suggests, was settled for its mineral resources, is the northernmost and smallest in size and population of the three. Its 2010 population of 5,916 is approximately half of what it was ninety years ago. This county lost another thousand people just in the last decade. Furthermore, half the population today is 45 years of age or older. Mining remains, as it always has, a "boom or bust" proposition. Vilas County, where one out of every seven acres is covered by a river or lake, is the only one of these three counties to be actually growing in population. Now a magnet for tourists and retirees, over half its population of 21,430 is 45 years or older. One township, Winchester, is larger in land area than Boston (53 square miles compared to 48), but its population of 383 residents is dwarfed by Boston's 617,000. Oneida County alone is larger than the State of Rhode Island but has a population of less than 36,000. It too was growing until the last decennial census. (3)

Inventing and Reinventing the Northwoods

The 1923 *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties* states that Oneida County was created out of Lincoln County in 1885 and, at first, included all of Oneida, Vilas, and much of Iron Counties. (4) In 1893, Vilas County separated from Oneida and the latter also gave up four additional townships to Iron. With a few additional minor land transfers, the boundaries of the three counties were pretty well established by the turn of the twentieth century. The final two decades of the nineteenth century saw a furious pace of development, boundary changes, and county creation—all because of trees. Lumber barons and railroad companies rushed into the region to harvest the virgin pine timber for which the North*woods* (italics added) was named. Rebuilding after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871and subsequent burgeoning growth there and in Milwaukee placed a premium on the fine lumber of this area. Towns, schools, and civilization followed the crude lumber camps in quick succession. For example, Eagle River, the future Vilas County seat, established its first school in 1884, nine years before the county was even created. By 1911, Vilas had 26 schoolhouses. (5)

What happened when, by 1920, the first growth trees were gone and much of the region resembled a meadow or swamp? The answer is that the people of the Northwoods invested their resources, this time as a farming area. Railroads without logs to haul transformed themselves into transporters of dairy products, potatoes, and hay. Newspapers of the 1920s routinely ran articles and advertisements extolling the greatness of the Northwood's latest crop. One headline proclaimed "Vilas County Wins Honors on Spuds." (6) Railroad brochures bragged of the fine climate and available land. Ethnic groups—notably Germans, Czechs, and Poles—settled together in large communities. County fairs, much as those in more populous areas to the south, displayed the prize crops and livestock for that year. Townships named Farmington and Cloverland appeared on the Vilas County map. And the construction of more country schools reflected the shift to an agricultural economy. However, in the late 1920s and 1930s a series of severe winters and crop failures dealt a strong blow to the area farmers. The 1920s were lean years for

farmers everywhere and the dealt Great Depression only worsened the situation. Many area farms and the nearby country schools were shuttered or abandoned entirely.

But the people of the Northwoods reinvented their region once again— this time as a vacation destination. Faster trains, better service, and, especially, the growth of the automobile made the Northwoods a one-day, or overnight, trip from Chicago or Milwaukee. The railroad companies now advertised the clear air, crystal waters, and modern resorts awaiting the Midwestern city dweller. People and schools once again shifted to be nearer the new highways, resorts, and small tourist towns. Well into the twentieth-first century now, the Northwoods of Wisconsin remains known as a year-around tourist and retirement destination.

Focusing on the Country Schools

Wisconsin State Oversight

Country schools were built on a legal foundation; thus, I focused on sources that explain Wisconsin state legislative acts and state board of education mandates. For example, in his excellent book, *One Room Country Schools, History and Recollections from Wisconsin,* Jerry Apps writes that the School Law of 1848—Wisconsin's statehood year—mandated a free public education for all children between four and twenty. (7) Other interesting provisions of the law made township supervisors responsible for organizing the districts within their townships. Once organized, however, districts were largely autonomous. Schools had to be open at least three months of the year. District taxes were limited to $300 for school buildings and $50 for libraries and other equipment. Apps states that teacher certification, once the province of the township, was eventually transferred to state authority. (8)

Policies set by the state board of education are usually reported in state-sponsored publications and local newspapers. For example, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Wisconsin State Legislature enacted a number of interesting statutes and regulations pertaining to schools. The July 9, 1919, issue of the *Vilas County News-Review*

announced a new state law that "every rural school …not [already] named must be given a name within a short time, either by the electors or the school board of the district." (9) If still undone, the county superintendent would make the decision.

Another interesting statute provided that when children lived two or more miles from school, the township had to provide transportation *or* room and board for that child *or* pay the parents 40 cents a day for *each* child they transported in a "safe and comfortable" conveyance. Some boards, apparently, had been disallowing claims based on this last clause. It was predicted that in one such case—of a surrey *without* a top—the issue would go before the Wisconsin Supreme Court. (10)

The 1923 booklet, *Wisconsin's Code for Rural School Privies,* established strict standards for outhouses. The bureaucracy in Madison mandated everything from the height and size of the entrance screen (5 ½′ to 6′) to the color of the paint (white or light gray), or the amount of toilet paper ("sufficient"), to the banning of "indecent pictures or suggestive words." A $500 fine, theoretically, awaited any miscreant who would so abuse the humble outhouse. (11)

Of course, we don't know how closely any of these rules were followed in practice. If teacher comments in their school register books are any indication, there was a wide gap between theory and reality. In fact, the Plum Lake School Board may have given its answer at its April 15, 1929 meeting: "Owing to large enrollment at Sayner School, state requirements oblige us to build double or triple size outbuildings there and with only $200 appropriated for the job it was not possible to build them[;] therefore useless to post bids for same." (12)

Other state laws specifically pertained to teachers. Under the heading "Strict Teaching Rules," the *Vilas County News-Review* informed its readers that "… rural school teachers must have taken one year of professional work before they are entitled to a county certificate unless they have had two years of successful experience in teaching." (13) One wonders how many teachers in a state with almost 6,000 rural schools received their county certificates under the auspices of this "grandfather clause?" Interestingly, Wisconsin had another law on the books to encourage rural teachers to stay in their schools for more than one year. Only 25 percent did so! The so-called "bonus law" provided

second-year teachers an extra $2 per month. Third-year teachers received $4 additional per month, and teachers with four or more years of experience took home an extra $8 each month. The *News-Review* reported that 1,656 rural teachers participated in this program. (14) At a time of $90 or $100 per month salaries, an extra $4 or $8 must have seemed most welcome.

Locating School Structures

To locate school buildings and districts, I relied heavily on maps. The United States Geological Survey (hereafter USGS) maps of the early twentieth century not only precisely located the buildings but also identified them by their common names. (15) In the 1930s and 40s, Wisconsin also completed the Wisconsin Land Economic Inventory, more commonly known as the "Bordner Survey." In addition to showing the farms, marshes, and forests of the state, it also located the principal structures, including rural schools. The Bordner Survey is very helpful for locating schools that might not have been present when the USGS maps were completed. (16) These resources are, of course, an additional tool to the traditional county and township plat maps.

Selecting Pertinent Information

Statistics

A major challenge of gathering information about country schools is deciding what information is most relevant to the purposes of the project. Statistics can be especially useful, if sometimes incomplete. For example, the 1923 *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties* reported that Oneida County had 53 rural schools in 30 different school districts during the 1922-23 academic year. Eighty-one teachers educated the 975 rural pupils plus those students in the ten "state graded" buildings and two high schools. In addition, Rhinelander, the county seat, was home to a state normal school. (17) To date, I have

identified 34 of the 53 rural school buildings. At least twelve of these remained standing into the twenty-first century.

That same history book states that Vilas County supported 36 country schools in 1922-23. Sixty-three teachers taught the 1,522 pupils enrolled in the rural schools, four state graded schools, and two high schools. Thirty-seven of the sixty-three teachers were in the country schools. Average daily attendance stood at 81 percent; a not inconsequential number in the days before a strict compulsory education law was passed. (18) So far, I have found 35 country schools that stood in Vilas County at one time or another. Of these, at least 18 remain standing today. Whenever possible, I have visited them.

Ordinary School Conditions

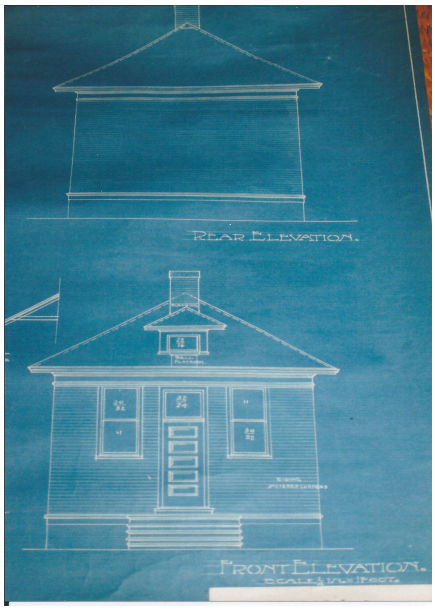
Other useful information concerns the ordinary conditions of Northwoods country schools and other structures on school grounds. In many cases, I have found relevant information in the newspapers, such as notices about the physical plans for a new school, the curriculum for one of more schools, the employment of a teacher, and tragic events. Following are examples of newspaper accounts revealing aspects of country schooling that are distinctive to Northwoods country schooling. In July 1919, the *Vilas County News-Review* published the following notice:

> Bids will be let for the building of a School House on Snipe Lake, Range 9, Section 15. The school house to be built as follows: Size 26 x 32, 10 ft. to ceiling from floor. Gable roof, one-third pitch. . . . Building to be set on cedar posts 18 inches in ground. . . . Outside of building to be painted green, trimmed with barn red. Inside to be finished with wainscot. . . . (19)

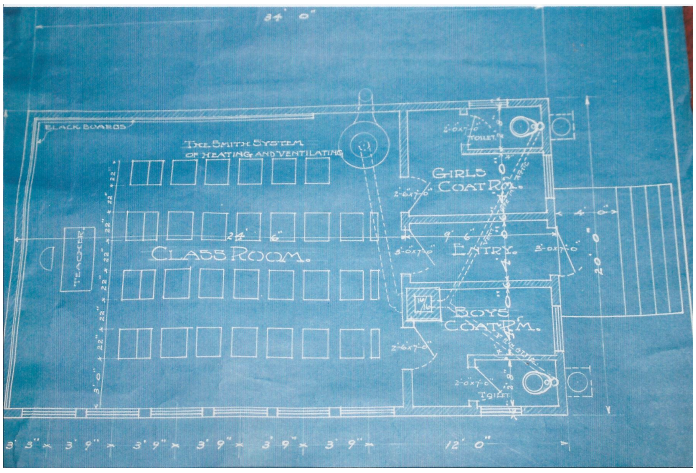
The bids also called for construction of a barn and woodshed along with 20 cords of wood. Interested parties were also asked to submit a transportation bid "made by some kind of vehicle, nothing short of auto, horse, or mule." (20)

Remarkably, both the now 93-year-old schoolhouse and barn on Snipe Lake remain standing today. When I arrived, unannounced, in the summer of 2011, the owners

welcomed me into what is now their home. They proudly described the remodeling they had done and their efforts to restore the building more to its original condition. Then they mentioned that they had found the original drawings and elevations behind a cabinet and asked if I would like to see them. Not only did they allow me to view these beautifully preserved drawings, they also permitted me to photograph them. These photos are reproduced here. Shown are the front and side elevations and the proposed layout of the classroom, including the Smith system of heating and ventilation.



Front and rear elevations, Muskellunge School.



Classroom blueprint.

Star Lake in Plum Lake Township is located near the geographic center of Vilas County. In the logging and lumber mill days of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several thousand people resided here. (21) Today, Star Lake is home to less than one hundred year-around residents. The first schoolhouse was undoubtedly built around 1894 when the railroad came into the area and made logging a thriving business. An old photograph shows the second Star Lake schoolhouse: the effects of clear-cutting the virgin forests are obvious.

Second Star Lake School House. Courtesy of the Vilas Historical Museum.

School conditions are often revealed in teachers' registers. For example, a "New Comprehensive School Register" for the years 1936 to 1939 and 1947-48 describes conditions in Arbutus School located in Section 36 of Range 9 East in Sugar Camp Township, Oneida County. The school register tells us that this district ran an 8½-month school year and that enrollment ranged from a high of 25 to a low of 14. Arbutus had the distinction of employing a male teacher, Harry Jones, for two of these years. District 1 seemed to provide a well-rounded education. In addition to the core subjects, all students were taught penmanship and received music instruction. Seventh and eighth graders learned agriculture, civics, and physiology (hygiene). (22)

In 1937 and again in 1938, Mr. Jones noted needed repairs to the school building: "Fix lock in front door," "Lock on woodshed door," "Fix boy's toilet door," "Fix bubbler," "Flag pole is beginning to rot," etc. As late as 1948, teacher Mrs. Doris Aspen reported that there were no screens on the windows or doors, and that warm lunches were not served. She did note that Arbutus was a State Graded School, covered more than an acre of land, provided "some playground apparatus," and possessed a radio, possibly to listen to Wisconsin School of the Air. (23)

Teachers were as blunt about their students' progress, or the lack thereof, as they were about the needs of their building. Comments such as, "Good, if she doesn't get stubborn," "Fair, but stubborn," "Good but thinks he knows all," and "Very poor – promoted

because of age" dot the school register book. Despite these negative assessments, only rarely did an Arbutus youngster go without promotion to the next grade. (24) Arbutus School remains today, now remodeled into a private home.

Arbutus School Today. Author's photo.

Tragic Events

Murder, fires, vandalism, and theft are the usual fare of newspapers, and such is the case with the *Vilas County News-Review*. For example, in May 1920, the newspaper published a tragic story about the murder of a child in a one-room school celebration in Powell, a small railroad town in Iron County. The school celebrated the close of the academic year with its annual picnic. Gwen Sherman, the little five-year-old cousin of teacher Blanche Peterson, was enjoying the games and company of her classmates. When she wandered away from the picnic area "for a few minutes" and did not return, Blanche Peterson commenced a search for her. The newspaper reported that her lifeless body was found "less than 200 feet from the schoolhouse." (25) A suspect, Edward McLeod, described as a "woodsman," was arrested a few hours later and charged with murder. He was taken to Ashland, a port town on Lake Superior, for trial. In what surely must rank as one of the swiftest examples of justice in Wisconsin history, McLeod was sentenced the same month to life in prison (the state did not have the death penalty). (26) What began as a happy and carefree outing ended with a tragic episode.

Another calamitous event, headlined in the *Vilas County News-Review* in December 1920, read as follows: "Information from Star Lake this morning is that the schoolhouse in that village [the one in the early photograph] was destroyed by fire on Monday of this week. No particulars as to the origin. . . ." (27) The school had been built a scant seven years earlier. The minutes of the annual meeting of electors for July 7, 1913, show that a "Motion was made and carried that school board have the power to erect a new school house at Star Lake within 30 days." (28) When, in wake of the disastrous fire, the voters met again at Sayner on July 5, 1921, they agreed that in addition to the $1,000 they had received for insurance, they would raise $1,500 to build another school at Star Lake." They also voted to ask a man named B. F. Wilson to "arrange to get a piece of land to build school house on." (31) That 1921 schoolhouse remains standing today, now owned by the Friends of the Fredericksons (a long time Star Lake family) and houses the Old Schoolhouse Gallery. This tiny community is trying to preserve its rich heritage. As the photograph shows, the porch, or entrance, in the shape of a caboose pays homage to the importance of the railroad to the town's history.

Sayner School, ca. 1920.
Courtesy of the Vilas Historical Museum

Star Lake School today. Author's photo.

The Consolidation Movement

School consolidation was a prominent feature in the decline of Northwoods country schooling. For example, in 1926, John Callahan authored the *Wisconsin Rural School Survey: Report of the Finance Survey Committee,* in which he summarized Wisconsin's 13-point "Educational Program." (30) The report includes many progressive features, such as a high school within the reach of all students, a state-aid equalization fund, a school year of not less than nine months, compulsory education, a "permanent tenure law," special education, and a program for the removal of illiteracy. However, the report also appears to be a not-so-subtle attack on country schools. For example, Point 5 (of the 13) calls for "the consolidation of rural schools whenever practical by a vote of the people." And, in his conclusions, Callahan stated,

> It is certain that these small schools, while probably necessary in the northern part of the state, are costly to operate and usually more inefficient than the schools with a larger enrollment. (31)

Callahan went on the build his case for consolidation with a non-financial argument:

> It is . . . evident that schools which are graded, which offer special education to physically and mentally handicapped children, which offer enriched curricula, and which provide high school opportunities are rendering a far greater service than the one room school." (32)

The *Rural School Survey* echoed earlier reports about the alleged shortcomings of country schools. One such example is found in a 1923 issue of the *Vilas County News-Review,* which states,

> In spite of determined efforts to wipe it out of existence the little red schoolhouse still holds forth in Wisconsin. It most likely is painted white now but the accommodations are no better. . . . Little one room shacks built 75 years ago are still

> being used for school purposes in some sections of the state with practically no improvements since they were built.

The authors concluded that such schools are "unsanitary," and "uncomfortable," yet they still have defenders, who say they could build cheaper school buildings if they did not have "to live up to certain specifications." (33)

Jerry Apps points out that consolidation in Wisconsin—as in other states—was a long and arduous process, one not completed until the 1960s. As late as 1959—thirty-three years after Callahan's report and a half century after the state's first efforts at consolidation—Sauk County, a relatively large county in the central part of the state, still had sixty-four rural school districts. (34)

Conclusions

One of the great pleasures of inquiring into country schools is interviewing the former students—now in their 60s, 70s, or 80s—who attended one or more of these humble schools well over a half century ago. The stories they tell make it clear that their country school education was a central facet of their lives. I have also interviewed the owners of a number of former schoolhouses now converted into comfortable homes. All such resources—interviews, maps, photographs, local histories, state laws and mandates, surveys, newspaper articles, scholarly publications, and my own observations—are providing me with a wealth of information about Northwoods country schools. It is hoped that this narrative will be useful to anyone beginning an inquiry similar to mine.

Notes

*Robert W. Frenz, *Historic Country Schools of McHenry County* (Evansville, IN: M.T. Publishing Co., 2008).

1. See www.uwec.edu/webprojects/geg367/northwoods.
2. I am here referring to non-native American settlement.
3. The figures are from the 2010 U. S. Census, which is readily available.
4. George O. Jones and Norman S. McVean, *History of Lincoln, Oneida, and Vilas Counties Wisconsin* (Minneapolis, MN: H.C. Cooper, 1924).
5. Ibid.
6. "Vilas County Wins Honors on Spuds," *Vilas County News-Review*, November 14, 1923.
7. Ibid.
8. Jerry Apps, *One Room Country Schools, History and Recollections from Wisconsin* (Amherst, WI: Amherst Press, 1996), 15-16.
9. *"New School Law," Vilas County News-Review,* July 9, 1919.
10. *Vilas County News-Review,* December 13, 1922.
11. Wisconsin State Board of Health, *Wisconsin's Code for Rural School Privies* (Madison, WI: State Board of Health, 1923.
12. District Record Book for Plum Lake Dist. 1, Vilas Historical Museum, Sayner, WI. This volume covers the years 1929 to 1933. Quotation from the minutes of the regular meeting of April 15, 1929.
13. "Strict Teaching Rules," *Vilas County News-Review,* May 10, 1922.
14. *Vilas County News-Review,* August 30, 1922.
15. Many of these maps are online at USGS.org, and copies can be ordered from the USGS for a small fee.
16. Wisconsin, Executive Council, *Land Economic Inventory of the State of Wisconsin* (Madison: n.p., 1934—).
17. Jones and McVean, *History,* 103-104.
18. Ibid., 188.
19. *Vilas County News-Review,* July 23, 1919.
20. Ibid.
21. Star Lake Tourism Council.
22. Henry Jones, New Comprehensive School Register, 1936-1938? Or 1947-1948? 1937-1938.

23. From 1931 to 1976, the University of Wisconsin operated the Wisconsin School of the Air. Programs such as "Music Enjoyment," "Let's Draw," and "Let's Find Out," were primarily directed to those rural school teachers who might lack expertise in music, art, science, or other subjects.
24. New Comprehensive School Register, 1936-38 and 1947-48.
25. "Meted Out Quick Sentence," *Vilas County News-Review,* May 26, 1920.
26. Ibid.
27. *Vilas County News-Review,* December 29, 1920.
28. The District Record Book for Plum Lake [WI], Vilas Historical Museum, Sayner, WI. This volume covers 1912 through 1929. Quotation taken from the Report of the Annual Meeting of July 7, 1913.
29. District Record Book, Report of the Annual Meeting of July 5, 1921.
30. John Callahan, *Wisconsin Rural School Survey: Report of the Finance Survey Committee* (n.p.: Wisconsin Teachers Association, [1926], 6-7. This can be accessed at www.digicoll.library.wisc.edu.
31. Ibid., 8.
32. Ibid., 9.
33. *Vilas County News-Review,* Aug. 22, 1923.
34. Apps, *One Room Country Schools,* 189.