

# New Tri-County School District Praised by Students, Parents, Townspeople

By Bruce Wimmer  
NU Journalism Student

"Our schools were in bad shape—building-wise, curriculum-wise. No doubt about it, some weren't even accredited."

That's how Vernon Grummett, a Plymouth, Neb., grocer, felt about area schools in 1965.

"But now I think these kids are getting a good education," Grummett said.

What caused his change in attitude?

The answer lies in the new Tri-County School District—a district which consolidated 14 rural and three high school districts into a new high school-junior high plant centrally located between main towns in the district.

### Couldn't Afford Schools

In 1965 there were scores of rural districts in the area and a number of small high schools. The high schools were in towns such as Swanton (pop. 190), Plymouth (pop. 372), and DeWitt (pop. 504).

As the cost of education rose, these smaller towns, like small towns throughout the state, were hard-pressed to meet the expenditure. Instructors often were teaching courses they were not qualified to teach but that were necessary for state

accreditation. The townspeople, although desperately wanting to keep their schools, simply could not afford them.

The same dilemma faces hundreds of small communities in Nebraska.

"We felt if the school went the whole town would crumble. On the other hand the taxes were killing us," admitted Don Dworak, executive vice president of the Plymouth bank.

The school is often the main industry for a small town. It's usually the largest single employer, Dworak noted.

"But finally it gets to where you face the risk of going down without a school or the certainty of collapse with unbearable taxes. Then you have to consider the kids too. What kind of an education are they getting while we save the town?"

"It's a tough decision for any area to make," according to Al Harms, who was president of the DeWitt school board in 1965, when that community faced just such a decision.

At that time area towns were averaging a levy of more than 40 mills to support their small high schools.

### Levy Nosedived

By contrast, after the reorganization which

ultimately followed, the levy nosedived. During the 1970-71 school year, for example, the mill levy was 28.02. That compared with a 46.47 mill levy in Fairbury, a 39.47 levy in Dorchester and a 36.09 levy in Wilber, all nearby communities.

Like so many communities in Nebraska, area school boards and citizenry had talked for years, usually in hushed tones, about school reorganization.

"Finally," Harms said, "we decided the time had come to act."

And like so many other smaller districts in the state, the area in question was near a much larger town and school system. In this case it was Beatrice.

"Beatrice was having problems of its own and they just said 'we're not interested in your area. Do what you can.'"

So in July 1965 a committee composed of representatives from Gage County, north of Beatrice, from an area in Jefferson County, north of Fairbury and from Saline County, south of Wilber, formed a "Tri-County Committee" to look into the possibility of a new, consolidated school district.

Fourteen rural and three high school districts were to be consolidated with a new high school-junior high plant

centrally located between principal towns in the proposed district.

"About this time Beatrice changed its mind. We had included the Phillips and Cominco (fertilizer) plants in our proposed district and they realized that was a pretty ripe plum in valuation. They decided they could use that too," Harms said.

Plymouth and Swanton residents reported they were courted by the Wilber school board to join a district it was reorganizing.

But the citizens in the Tri-County area had made up their minds. They wanted a district they would have some say in running and one outside any given community.

### Rural Opposition

Opposition to the plan was centered in rural areas—where taxes would be raised and near Beatrice where rural children who were currently enrolled in the Beatrice schools would be transferred to Tri-County.

Hearings were held in each community area. The discussion was largely favorable.

"I favored the proposal from the beginning, but not without some reservations," an area resident said. "I figured it was the better of two evils."

Gerald Rehm, an implement dealer in DeWitt, agreed. "I was worried that business

might severely fall off in town," he said.

Finally, in August 1965, the Tri-County Committee, by a 5-4 vote, decided to put the issue to the test. A special election was scheduled.

In December 1965, just before the election, a petition was filed in District Court to stop the election. But the court decided the vote should be held.

The result was an overwhelming 84 per cent of the voters voting for the new consolidated district. Of 1,340 who voted, only 210 opposed the plan. Heaviest opposition came from the rural areas where the vote was still 460-165 in favor.

The election sparked a large turnout. In Swanton, for example, all but one registered voter cast a ballot and all the votes there favored the proposal.

In January 1966 the district was officially recognized. Six school board members were elected by district and Harms was selected president of the Tri-County school board.

### Rid of Opposition

Many of those opposing the new district lived near Beatrice and petitioned out of the district to join the Beatrice school district.

"We let them go and thus lost most of our opposition before we got started," Harms

said. But that was five years ago. What do people think now? Was it a wise decision?

The new district encompasses some 300 square miles with a valuation during the 1970-71 school year of \$25,267,373.00. There are 710 students in the district, although more than 130 attend parochial grade schools.

Rehm said, "You're going to have to look awhile to find anyone opposed to the consolidated school now."

He was right. DeWitt bank president Lloyd Van Cleef said, "I see a lot of people and they're really pretty satisfied now. There were those who were skeptical but they have changed their minds by now."

Harms said, "I knew the opposition well but I think it's extinct now. Tri-County is just accepted as the local school."

There are many theories on why Tri-County is so well-accepted. Fred L. Shickell, superintendent of the Tri-County schools, said, "The first year was the roughest."

Shickell was superintendent at DeWitt when the district reorganized and has been at Tri-County ever since. He was teaching in Iowa while that state underwent extensive statewide reorganization. He knew what to expect. "The kids came here with anxieties

but they adjusted very quickly," Shickell said.

With the parents the adjustment was much slower. School board members Maurice Bergmeir, a DeWitt area farmer, and Glenn Weichel, a Plymouth area farmer, talked about the rivalries that had existed between the area towns.

### Rivalries Lessened

"At first it was still pretty hard for Plymouth people, for example, to get excited about something that might involve someone from 'clear over at DeWitt,'" Weichel said. "It's been five years, though, and I see some big changes in the attitude of everyone now."

"We had a very successful basketball season and the starters came from every area in the district... everyone was rooting for the team and suddenly the old rivals had something in common to brag about. It really helped," Bergmeir added.

The strong sentiments probably were most noticeable when all the old schools and equipment went on sale. Most of the buyers at the sales were from the immediate locality of that school, nostalgically buying a piece of the past, some memories, by purchasing an old textbook or tarnished school bell.

One of the rural schoolhouses closed by the consolidation was historically significant. It was the original Daniel Freeman School and is now owned by the National Park Service. It will be restored and in 1973 will become a part of the Memorial Park dedicated to Freeman, first homesteader in the nation.

Supt. Shickell also noted that most of this year's 62 graduates never attended any high school but Tri-County. "They never attended a Plymouth or DeWitt or Swanton high school. For them it's always been Tri-County."

Shickell mentioned another tangible he thought had made Tri-County go: "The school is almost the geographic center of the district, and it is not in any town."

"The reorganization might have hurt us a little, but it hurt us equally if it hurt us at all," said a Plymouth businessman. That psychological factor is

important, Shickell said. "No town should feel it's supporting a school that just benefits some other town."

"After all," he added, "we're talking about people's pocketbooks here and that's a key to anything."

John Hegwood is the junior high-high school principal. The past year was his first at Tri-County.

"I can only look at Tri-County for what it is now, a good-sized Class B school," he said. And that compares with a slug of little Class D schools before consolidation.

"You know the quality of teachers this school attracts is higher than before. There is the building, facilities and the stability."

"This is a basically conservative, rural agricultural area, but they really accepted this and now we are able to expand and provide vocational agriculture and training programs on a scale that should benefit this area."

The students recently interviewed had nothing but favorable comments about the consolidated aspect of the school.

"I might like to see a few more classes offered, or something like that, but I like Tri-County," said Patti Cergeny, a junior from Swanton.

"I feel more confident, like I'm getting better preparation here than in the little high school I would otherwise have attended," she said.

Robert Niemeier, also a junior, lives eight miles from Beatrice. His parents originally were opposed to the consolidation because it meant his older sister had to leave Beatrice in her senior year to attend the new school at Tri-County.

"But they've changed now, because Beatrice is having some problems, and I like it here," he said.

Niemeier seemed to catch the spirit of the Tri-County area when he said, "I think the whole school kind of flourished the first year or so but now we're together. It was a gradual thing but there's a unity built around Tri-County now."

"We say something to the whole state when we say 'we're Tri-County Trojans.'"

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## Classics Scholar Honored At Summer Commencement

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln conferred an honorary doctor of letters degree upon a noted scholar of the classics, Professor Clarence A. Forbes of Columbus, O., at its summer commencement Wednesday at Pershing Municipal Auditorium.

Dr. Forbes, a native of Colebrook, N.H., served on the University of Nebraska faculty from 1927 until 1948. Since then, until his retirement this spring, he has been a professor of classics at Ohio State University where his excellence as a teacher brought him the College of Arts & Sciences Good Teacher Award in 1963.

Professor Forbes has traveled and studied extensively in Italy and Greece and his six books and more than three dozen published papers cover a variety of Greek and Roman subjects. The main thrust of his work, however, deals with Greek athletics and physical education and with Greek youth organizations.

He is a former president of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, a member of the American Institute of Archaeology, the American Philological Association, and the American Classic League.

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