

Education on the Frontier

Schools, Teachers and Community Influence in North-Central British Columbia

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Rural education in British Columbia has traditionally been studied from urban-based perspectives. A more intimate interpretation of rural schools is called for, one afforded by the "window on rural society", namely the remote one-room school and its teacher. What did it mean to be a teacher in a small rural school in north-central British Columbia in the 1920s, and what was the interrelationship between the isolated school, its teacher and the community? The answers to these questions are pursued by looking at the experiences of individual teachers, highlighting the teacher's struggle to adapt to adverse physical and social conditions in his or her private and public life, and examining the community's reaction to the efforts by the Department of Education to improve rural school systems. This case study of a specific geographical region in British Columbia demonstrates that rural schools, along with community politics and society, were often markedly different from their urban counterparts.

L'école rurale en Colombie-Britannique n'a été étudiée à ce jour que dans une perspective urbaine. Un autre regard s'impose, plus intimiste, comme « à travers une fenêtre s'ouvrant sur le monde rural » d'où l'on verrait, esseulées, l'institutrice et sa petite école. Que signifiait, dans les années 1920, enseigner dans une école de campagne du nord de la Colombie-Britannique centrale, et quelle était la nature des rapports entre l'école, l'institutrice et la collectivité ? Pour répondre à ces questions, on a interrogé l'expérience de diverses enseignantes, mettant en lumière leurs efforts pour s'adapter à des conditions matérielles et sociales hostiles et examinant les réactions des collectivités face aux mesures prises par le ministère de l'Éducation pour améliorer les systèmes scolaires ruraux. Cette étude de cas sur une région précise de la Colombie-Britannique permet de voir que les écoles rurales, de même que les réalités politiques et sociales de ces milieux, diffèrent souvent de façon marquée des pratiques et des réalités urbaines en ces domaines.

In the last decade, numerous studies have appeared on the history of teachers and teaching in Canada, but they tell us little about the experience of individual teachers, the expectations put upon them, the personal meaning of

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teaching as work, and how teachers themselves made sense of their lives both in the classroom and in the communities in which they lived and worked. Teachers, especially women, in the words of an American scholar:

have been portrayed as objects rather than subjects, as either the unknowing tools of the social elite or as the exploited minority whose labour is bought cheaply. Rarely have they been treated as subjects in control of their own activities. Seldom has the world of schooling been presented through their eyes.¹

Similarly, Alison Prentice recently called upon educational historians in Canada “to go beyond the history of schools and colleges to the history of the people who made these institutions what they were...to look at the people who organized them locally, who taught in them, and who attended them.”² Educational history should not stop at the story of the great men who created schools, colleges, and universities in the nineteenth century and transformed their curricula and structures in the twentieth century, but also must include the ordinary men and women who taught in them, who conveyed the official knowledge in the thousands of schools across Canada.³ This article proposes to look at some of those teachers who taught in the 67 one-room schools opened between 1906 and 1930 in the remote region of north-central British Columbia that encompasses in general terms the Bulkley and Nechako Valleys. In that sense, this is a regional history, something which Chad Gaffield has pointed out has been the terrain of local historical societies and “traditionally dismissed as the forums of kindly but incompetent antiquarians.”⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, rural life was still an important feature in the social formation of the majority of Canadians and the one-room school was the predominant educational structure across rural Canada.⁵ A study of such schools, therefore, can serve as a window on rural society, broadening our knowledge about the nature of that society and leading us to revise some of the standard interpretations of the period — interpretations which are in fact profoundly urban-based. As late as 1921, over one-half of the residents of British Columbia lived in rural areas,⁶ and 806 (or 85.2 percent)

1. Richard A. Quartz, “The Complex Visions of Female Teachers and the Failure of Unionization in the 1930s: An Oral History,” *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. XXV, no. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 439.

2. Alison Prentice, “Introduction,” *Ontario History*, vol. LXXVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1986), p. 281.

3. The last synthesis of the history of teachers in Canada, J.G. Althouse’s *The Ontario Teacher* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), appeared in print in 1967 although it was based on a thesis written almost 40 years earlier.

4. Chad Gaffield, “The New Regional History: Rethinking the History of the Outaouais,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. XXVI, no. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 64.

5. For validation that rural society was very different from urban society in twentieth-century Canada, see the plate on “Schooling and Social Structure” (Plate 33) in Donald Kerr and Deryck Holdsworth, eds., *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume III, Addressing the Twentieth Century, 1891-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

6. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1936), pp. 364-369.

of the total number of 946 schools in the province were situated far from urban centres.⁷ In 1925, almost one-half (48.3 percent) of the total enrollment of 97,954 pupils in British Columbia attended rural schools, and of the 3,115 teachers employed in the province, 58.2 percent were employed in rural districts.⁸ The attachment to the neighbourhood school and the notion that education, to some degree, should be controlled by the local people (who pay some of the bills and whose children attend the school) are part of the lasting legacy of small rural schools.

This study poses two main questions. Firstly, what did it mean to be a teacher in a small rural school in north-central British Columbia in the 1920s, particularly in a one-room school? What were the role, status and working conditions of the teachers of these schools? Teachers for the most part successfully confronted the challenge of a pioneering society and met their own needs in personal and often unexpected ways. Some, although by no means all, female teachers used their occupational role to establish a degree of independence, autonomy and self-esteem quite unavailable to their counterparts in city schools. Typical was the testimony of Lillian Gates regarding her experience in the Cariboo.

I loved to be alone in my teacher's residence at Willow River, even if, in the winter months, sometimes at -45 degrees, I had to get up every 2-3 hours all night to keep my little wooden heater going. I loved to walk along the old logging trails, through the silent forests.... I learned to shoot, without success. The parents of my pupils supplied me with moose meat, caribou, grouse, ptarmigan and wild mushrooms.⁹

Secondly, what was the interrelationship between these schools and their respective communities? How did the community influence the school's operation and what influence, if any, did the school have upon the community? The answers to these questions should provide useful insights into not only the phenomenon of rural schooling in the province and the nation in the 1920s, but also the nature of rural life itself.¹⁰

7. British Columbia, *Annual Report of the Public Schools*, 1921, F9. Those schools in rural municipalities as well as those designated as "rural" schools are included in the calculations.

8. *Ibid.*, 1925, M9.

9. Lee Stewart, "It's Up to You": Women at UBC in the Early Years (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), p. 97. For similar experiences on the part of rural public health nurses, see Susan E. Riddell, "Curing Society's Ills: Public Health Nurses and Public Health Nursing in Rural British Columbia, 1919-1946" (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1991).

10. For some representative studies on teachers in Canada, see, for example, Robert S. Patterson, "Voices From the Past: The Personal and Professional Struggles of Rural School Teachers," in *Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History*, Nancy M. Sheehan, J. Donald Wilson and David C. Jones, eds. (Calgary: Detselig, 1986), pp. 91-111; John Abbott, "Accomplishing A Man's Task: Rural Women Teachers, Male Culture, and the School Inspectorate in Turn-of-the-Century Ontario," *Ontario History*, vol. LXXVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1986), pp. 313-330; J. Donald Wilson and Paul J. Stortz, "'May the Lord Have Mercy on You': The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," *BC Studies*, no. 79 (Autumn 1988), pp. 24-58; J. Donald Wilson, "The Visions of Ordinary Participants: Teachers'

Our intention is not to present an oral history of teachers and teaching in the region under study. Recent examples of work of this sort may be found in *The Teacher's Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America*, edited by Richard J. Altenbaugh.¹¹ Fortunately, a study is in progress of another region of British Columbia, the Okanagan Valley, wherein the author, as a result of a series of interviews with surviving teachers from the 1920s, seeks to examine the place of teaching in the context of the whole of the teachers' lives rather than just focusing on their experiences in the 1920s.¹² For an account of rural teachers' lives in the entire province, there also is a study of the reports of the Rural Teachers' Welfare Officer, Lottie Bowron, who visited hundreds of teachers between 1928 and 1934.¹³ We do not attempt a discussion of the curriculum or the classroom milieu of these schools. That is the subject of another study. A closer look at the actual pedagogy in the classroom could reveal some interesting data about the importance urban administrators placed upon uniform curriculum and teaching practices throughout the province, regardless of the school's location.

The Upper Skeena River to the Nechako Valley, 1900-1930

The area of study, a pioneering district, is in the northwest centre of the province of British Columbia, approximately 700 miles north of Vancouver (see Map 1). The 1931 *Census* designated this area as "subdistrict 8e, f, and g"¹⁴ (see Map 2). The region is approximately 30,000 square miles,¹⁵ about 300 miles long from north to south, and 120 miles wide at its base.

Views of Rural Schooling in British Columbia in the 1920s," in Patricia E. Roy, ed., *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1989), pp. 239-255; J. Donald Wilson, "I am ready to be of assistance when I can": Lottie Bowron and Rural Female Teachers in British Columbia," in Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald, eds., *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 202-29. For a survey of recent rural history in Canada, see Catharine Anne Wilson, "'Outstanding in the Field': Recent Rural History in Canada," *Acadiensis*, vol. XX, no. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 177-190. For the importance of regionalism in Canadian history, see Janine Brodie, *The Political Economy of Canadian Regionalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) and Plate 66 in *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume III*, which shows that Canada is composed of more than 60 regions. See also Chad Gaffield, "The New Regional History," pp. 64-81.

11. (London: Falmer Press, 1992). As Altenbaugh asserts: "Oral history enables educational historians to open the classroom door and investigate schooling from the perspective of one of its principal participants — the teacher" (p. 4).

12. Penny Stephenson, "Rural Schools and Teaching in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley in the 1920s" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, forthcoming).

13. J.D. Wilson, "I am ready to be of assistance." See also, by the same author, "May the Lord Have Mercy on You" and "The Visions of Ordinary Participants."

14. Unless otherwise stated these subdistricts will be referred to as a district, singular.

15. Calculated from the figure given for all of District 8 which extends to the Alberta border as far north as MacKenzie and as far south as Williams Lake and Alexis Creek. See the 1931 *Census*, vol. II, pp. 5-6.

Until 1930, patches of settlement were located along a thin valley winding from Vanderhoof in the Nechako Valley, northwest through Smithers in the Bulkley Valley, north to Hazelton then south along the Skeena River to Terrace. This was a 350-mile strip of land approximately 15 miles wide on either side of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. Tiny communities also were found in the low rolling marsh and farm lands of François and Ootsa Lakes south of Burns Lake, and in the northern outpost of Fort St. James, about 50 miles north of Vanderhoof. The remaining area, consisting of heavily-timbered mountainous wilderness, remained unsettled other than by the indigenous Athapaskan and Tsimshian Indian tribal groups.¹⁶ By 1930, this relatively small geographical area within the wide expanse of the interior of British Columbia contained some 67 schools.

It was the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (G.T.P.) that opened up this area to European settlement.¹⁷ Although the district between Terrace and north of François Lake was populated sporadically by lone prospectors and trappers, and by missionaries and Indians, no major influx of Europeans occurred until the first few years of the twentieth century when railway survey workers travelled perilously up the Skeena River by steamboat, then down the Bulkley River.¹⁸ Every convenient port in which they stopped was later established as an administrative centre, a supply depot, and in the case of Pacific, Dorreen, Smithers, Telkwa, Quick, and Houston, as railway construction camps. Transportation and communication networks grew (by 1915, Hazelton was receiving mail twice a week)¹⁹ as people steadily moved into the Skeena and

16. See Wilson Duff, *The Impact of the White Man, Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir*, vol. 1, no. 5 (Victoria: Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology, 1964), for an extensive study of the Indian ethnic divisions and tribes in British Columbia.

17. For a succinct summary of the rise and fall of the GTP Railway, see Cole Harris, "Moving Amid the Mountains, 1870-1930," *BC Studies*, no. 58 (Summer 1983), pp. 17-23. See also Frank Leonard, "Grand Trunk Pacific and the Establishment of the City of Prince George, 1911-1915," *BC Studies*, no. 63 (Autumn 1984), pp. 29-54.

18. Information on the history of the district before and after 1900 is contained in Nan Bourgon, *Rubber Boots for Dancing: And Other Memories of Pioneer Life in the Bulkley Valley* (Smithers, B.C.: Tona and Janet Heatherington, 1979); Sperry Cline, Wiggs O'Neil, Mrs. E.N. Whitlow and Stan Rough, *Along the Totem Trail: Port Essington to Hazelton* (Kitimat: Northern Sentinel Press, 1961); Lynn Hancock, *Vanderhoof: The Town That Wouldn't Wait* (Vanderhoof: Nechako Valley Historical Society, 1979); Jack Mould, *Stumpfarms and Broadaxes* (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1976); R. Lynn Shervill, *Smithers: From Swamp to Village* (Smithers: The Town of Smithers, 1981); and Pat Turkki, *Burns Lake and District: A History Formal and Informal* (Burns Lake: Burns Lake Historical Society, 1973). For the experiences of children in the Bulkley Valley, see Neil Sutherland, "I can't recall when I didn't help": The Working Lives of Pioneering Children in Twentieth-Century British Columbia," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, vol. XXIV, no. 48 (Nov. 1991), pp. 263-288.

19. For interesting reading on the early means of communication and transportation in the district by river steamers, canoes, and even dog teams, see Wiggs O'Neil, "Time and Place," Provincial Archives of B.C. (PABC) (n.d.).

Bulkley Valley regions from both the west and east. As an economic draw, however, the railway became shortly thereafter somewhat of a disappointment. As its full potential was never realized as a means to move western Canadian goods from Alberta and further east to Pacific ports, the railway was used to move lumber to Prince Rupert and, in the 1920s, to local sawmills, as well as to transport passengers and small freight, like milk, within the district. Railroad towns like Engen, Endako, Burns Lake, and Topley sprang up, only to be left surviving precariously once the construction camps shut down. Small groups of maintenance workers remained to repair and service equipment, each composed of three to four men who lived in makeshift accommodation. Divisional points became homes for train engineers and other crew. In Endako, men usually stayed in the hotel, making the after-school life of the young female teacher who stayed there rather threatening.²⁰ By 1914, Burns Lake resembled a collection of tents rather than a permanent settlement, and many of these communities throughout the war years served as meeting places for nearby prospectors, trappers, and land seekers because they held a store or a post office.²¹

The population of the district increased marginally after 1918 because of postwar soldier settlement schemes designed by the provincial government,²² a slowly expanding service industry, increased need for railway ties for domestic use, and new mineral discoveries around Babine Lake. The district's population grew to over 8,000 by 1920; however, the growth subsequently was slowed by such factors as wildly fluctuating mineral markets, no increase in railway tie demand,²³ land which in some areas proved to be unproductive, a lack of local markets for produce, and a falling market for furs. Between 1920 and 1930, the population in this vast territory rose by only 1,600 people.²⁴ The area remained overwhelmingly rural, characterized by unincorporated communities,²⁵ with Smithers, Burns Lake, and Vanderhoof the only

20. Interview with Dorothy Johnson by Neil Sutherland, May 1978. Ms. Johnson taught in Endako in 1919-1920.

21. See Mould, *Stumpfarms*, pp. 131-134. For a good description of the settlements which were composed primarily of tents and scattered cabins along the new GTP railway, see Turkki, *Burns Lake*.

22. Mould, *Stumpfarms*, p. 13.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 36. The tie industry remained constant throughout the 1920s, doing excellent business. Between 1924-1930, over five million ties were shipped out of the Burns Lake/South Bulkley Valley region. For the forest industry in the Prince George district, see Gordon Hak, "Prairie Capital, Prairie Markets, and Prairie Labour: The Forest Industry in the Prince George District, British Columbia, 1910-1930," *Prairie Forum*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 9-22.

24. The figures were calculated from the 1931 *Census*, vol. II, pp. 103-106.

25. The 1931 *Census* (vol. I, p. 154) defines "rural" as those areas not incorporated into cities, towns, villages, or hamlets. This is a useful distinction because "the incorporation of a town or village is a reflection of the needs of the surrounding area."

incorporated settlements and the only communities of more than 200 residents in the entire district by 1931.²⁶

The district's population was highly transient as the inevitable consequence of economic instability. The tenuous nature of some of the activity caused rapid movements in population away from depressed areas and into regions where employment opportunities existed. Miners came and went according to fluctuating markets (mines were located near Usk, Kispiox, Smithers, and Telkwa), and railway and later road construction workers stayed only as long as they were needed. Homesteaders found excellent pastures for crop and stock-raising in some areas, but even after the first financially lean years of land-clearing, with few local markets to sell produce, the style of farm living long remained pioneer.²⁷

Like many other areas of Canada which contained multi-economy rural zones between 1900 and 1930, the settlers in the Upper Skeena, Bulkley Valley, François and Ootsa Lakes, and the Nechako Valley were often engaged in a variety of economic activities. Trapping, mining, ranching, mixed-farming,²⁸ railway and road construction and maintenance, land clearing, and tie-hacking were all viable pursuits. Indeed, the tie-making industry was a god-send to the struggling settlers. Throughout the 1920s, many farmers chose to supplement their subsistence in the winter by taking advantage of the market for railway ties. Between October and April, when the ties could be easily transported over the snow or ice, summer farmers became freelance tie-cutters or part of a group hired by a logging company²⁹ which cut down trees into manageable portions and transported the logs by horse and sleigh along icy paths to the railway. The logs were loaded onto flatbeds at the railway sidings and shipped to local sawmills for processing.³⁰ The ties were used for rail repair or sent to Prince Rupert for shipment to export markets. This rather straightforward operation — the more trees cut the higher the pay

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194. Smithers was incorporated as a village in 1921, and by 1931 had a recorded population of 999; Burns Lake was incorporated in 1923 with a population in 1931 of 202; and Vanderhoof's incorporation date was 1926, with a 1931 population of 305.

27. The 1931 *Census* (vol. VIII, pp. 764-765) shows the Nechako region to be highly agricultural. Of the 1,920 residents recorded, 1,288 lived on farms (67%). Considering that individual farms were typically isolated, these figures reflect the scattered nature of the settlement in this part of the district.

28. In this region, mixed farmers raised an assortment of crops which included wheat, oats, mixed grains, hay, potatoes, roots, corn, beans, peas, turnips, carrots, bush fruit, timothy, grass and clover seeds, and even rice. Some farmers raised horses, cattle, sheep, swine, and poultry as well. For a list of the district's farm livestock and produce, see the 1931 *Census*, vol. VIII, pp. 728-753. See the *Burns Lake Observer*, May 5, 1927, for a contemporary account of the history of economic activity in the region.

29. The most prominent contracting companies of tie-hackers were the Hanson Lumber and Timber Company of Smithers and Decker Lake's Anderson Company, both of which sub-contracted out to two to six men operations throughout the countryside. See Mould, *Stumpfarms*, pp. 25-31.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-81.

— allowed subsistence farmers the necessary resources, the cash to purchase seed and farm equipment, to survive the summer months on their homesteads.³¹

The tie-making industry added both permanency and transiency to the district's population. Sawmills at Decker Lake, Rose Lake, and Quick ensured the existence of various settlements throughout the 1920s, while individual tie-hackers and those in camps of between two and twenty workers roamed the timbered wilderness for pine, spruce, and cedar trees. The hackers who were not part-time farmers were especially susceptible to being uprooted and forced to travel to less cutover areas, and often their families were obliged to live in a succession of make-shift quarters as they moved from one shack to another with every new tie season.³²

No one economic activity was exclusive to a particular region, and in many areas, community members comprised an assortment of trappers, miners, railway and road construction personnel, ranchers, tie-makers, or farmers. Within this mixture of mobile and permanent populations, the desire for educational opportunity was strong, as evidenced by the proliferation of one-room schools in the district.

The Establishment of Schools, 1906-1930

Between 1906 and 1930, this district acquired 67 schools whose appearance closely followed settlement patterns.³³ First established in major communities, the schools quickly spread throughout the countryside. In 1906, Hazelton became the first community in the district to establish an officially-recognized one-room school. The second one-room school was opened in 1913 in Telkwa, an early administrative and coal-mining centre. Schools sometimes appeared in places so sparsely populated that only two or three

31. In his *Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), Chad Gaffield describes the logger/farmer in nineteenth-century eastern Ontario. The so-called "système agro-forestier" was remarkably similar to the subsistence farmer/winter tie-hacker of the north-central interior of British Columbia in the 1920s. Prescott County settlers similarly relied on cutting wood in the winter to sell as lumber in order to survive the summer months on the farms (pp. 83-89). Another book which examines an agri-forestry zone with parallels to north-central British Columbia is J.L. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

32. See Mould, *Stumpfarms*, for an excellent account of the farmer/tie-hacker in the Bulkley Valley-Burns Lake region. The tie-hacking industry was often characterized by "cut and get out" operations (p. 36).

33. Note that the number of schools reflected the influx of settlers into the district, especially between 1918-1923, and that the stagnation of the schools' growth later in the 1920s corresponded with the drastic drop in new settlement at that time. For a map of the one-room schools in the area, see Paul J. Stortz, "The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988), maps 3 and 4, pp. 74-78.

families existed who were able to provide the minimum enrollment of ten students.³⁴

While most schools in the district remained small throughout the 1920s, others grew into multi-roomed rural schools to cope with an expanding school population (*see* Fig. 1). By 1930, Vanderhoof, Burns Lake, Telkwa, Smithers, Hazelton, and New Hazelton had all established multi-roomed rural schools with an average enrollment of 90. Although 50 one-room schools were open in 1930, the multi-divisional schools enrolled just under one-half of the pupils in the district. By 1930, Smithers and Vanderhoof were commercial depots while sawmills had opened in Hazelton, New Hazelton, and Burns Lake.

In general, the district's one-room schools were tiny, individual entities. In the 1920s, the average class size was 13.6 students, one-quarter less than the mean enrollment of all other assisted schools in the province and just over one-half (51.2 percent) of the average class size of all rural and assisted schools.³⁵ Moreover, between 1920 and 1930, the one-room schools in the district lost students. The average school enrollment in 1919 was 16.7 pupils; in 1921, 15.9 pupils. The enrollment fluctuated for five years until 1927, when an average school size was 13.9 pupils, and then steadily declined to the 1930 figure of 12.8 (*see* Fig. 2).

Local histories allow for a closer look into the chronology of various settlements and the opening of schools. They indicate that the necessary three-person school board, elected among members of the immediate district, as well as the required ten-pupil enrollment for a new school,³⁶ were in place very soon after the population was large enough to support such an institution.

Often, schools would open with fewer than 10 pupils. A common practice was to temporarily "borrow" pupils from nearby schools to fulfill the

34. For example, Kispiox school, in a small farming and trapping settlement north of Hazelton, had an enrollment of eight, all from one family, *Teachers' Bureau Records, 1928* [hereafter Bureau Records]. Close to 1,400 questionnaires were completed by rural B.C. teachers in 1923 and 1928 at the behest of the Teachers' Bureau of the Department of Education. Located in the PABC, they are organized alphabetically by school and year (1923 and 1928).

35. Assisted school figures are based on the Department of Education *Annual Reports, Statistical Tables, 1926-1930*, and for rural and assisted schools, 1920-1930. Rural status referred to a school that was neither urban nor rural municipality, and as a result was without the benefit of centralized municipal administration or finance. The government, however, provided an annual grant amounting to less than one-half of the teacher's salary with the remaining monies being acquired by a tax on local property. In the case of assisted schools, the government paid the teacher's salary in full while local residents were expected to meet maintenance costs and supplies. The extent to which communities met these costs varied greatly from community to community. Another distinction was that rural schools had 20 pupils or more whereas assisted schools had fewer than 20 pupils. At times, inspectors referred to both rural and assisted schools as "rural", and for convenience, we will follow this practice here.

36. As stipulated in the *Annual Report, 1896*, p. 185.

necessary minimum or to enroll underage children.³⁷ The schools established in poor settlements suggest that education to many was an important concern, at times second only to making a living.³⁸ Schools were established in conjunction with other buildings of community service, very often immediately after or just before the construction of the local church. In Burns Lake, for instance, the rush for land which brought settlers into the region in 1917 saw a church built that same year, a school the next, followed in 1919 by restaurants, stores, and a post office.³⁹

The Teacher in This Region

Between 1915 and 1930, a total of at least 579 one-room school teachers taught in the district. The figure actually may have been higher since notification of teacher changes did not always reach Victoria and become recorded in the *Annual Reports*. In 1924, Inspector H.C. Fraser of Prince Rupert observed that "the North is a man's country."⁴⁰ Indeed, 31.1 percent of all one-room school teachers were male as compared to a province-wide proportion for rural and assisted schools of 21.0 percent. Lottie Bowron, the Rural Teachers' Welfare Officer, visited 37 of the schools in the district between 1929 and 1932. Using her loose criteria of comfort and safety, she designated fully half or 18 of them as those in which only a man or older married woman should be sent.⁴¹ Despite her recommendations, into the 1930s, the percentage of teachers who were women and unmarried increased.⁴²

From the mid-1920s, the one-room school teachers in the district followed a provincial rural and assisted school trend of becoming more highly qualified. In 1925, of all one-room school teachers, 27 percent held either an academic or first class teaching certificate while 70.8 percent held a second or

37. A question arises which concerns the enrollment and attendance figures for each school in the district. Verifying the accuracy of these statistics is impossible. Evidence does not exist of "borrowed" pupils who may have returned to their own school districts sometime during the school year, or of outright teacher misrepresentation of the number of pupils in the school in an effort to keep the school open and teaching jobs secure. Inspectors also were known to occasionally turn a blind eye.

38. In *Stumpfarms*, Mould argues that schooling was second on the list of pioneer's priorities (p. 111).

39. Turki, *Burns Lake*, pp. 30-40.

40. *Annual Report*, 1924, p. T58.

41. Department of Education School Inspectors' Reports, Reports of Rural Teachers' Welfare Officer [hereafter Bowron Reports], 1928-1929. Each school report by Bowron has been filed alphabetically by school and year. For details on her term of office, see J. Donald Wilson, "I am here to help you if you need me": British Columbia's Rural Teachers' Welfare Officer, 1928-1934," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol XXV, no. 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 94-118.

42. This appears to be a province-wide trend in assisted schools; in 1926, the proportion of women teachers rose from 81.5% to 83.5% in 1930, and those teachers who were single also climbed from 91.3% to 92.5% during the same period. As well, between 1926-1930, in all of the province's assisted schools, the proportion of women teachers who were married dropped from 8.8% to 7.5%. Both percentages were slightly higher than those for the one-room school teachers in this district.

third class certificate.⁴³ By 1930, the gap between well and poorly qualified had closed to 40.4 percent as opposed to 57.7 percent respectively, the remaining number in possession of a temporary certificate.

Between 1915 and 1930, omitting those teachers who left the one-room schools because the schools closed (28 teachers or 4.8 percent of the district's total), the average amount of time a teacher stayed in any one of these schools was only 1.28 years. Recorded in the *Putman-Weir Report* for 1925, the figure for the rural and assisted school teachers throughout the province was 1.62 years.⁴⁴

Indeed, in 1921, of all the one-room school teachers in the area, 92 percent did not return to the schools they had taught in the previous year. The turnover rate declined to 70 percent in 1926, rising slightly to 76 percent by 1930. In other words, approximately three out of four schools had a new teacher each September and some more frequently than that. This was significant because the pupils and community of each school were forced to readjust to each change.⁴⁵

Between 1915 and 1930, 11.7 percent of all the transient teachers in these one-room schools transferred to an other school in the district, some more than once. It was hoped that by tracing the travels of this group of teachers, a pattern might be uncovered as to why a teacher vacated a one-room school for another, but no such pattern was discernible. Teacher transiency seemed quite arbitrary. Some teachers left a school for a post just a few miles away while over a summer, other teachers travelled from one end of the district to the other. In an extreme example, in 1919, Miss E.M. Law transferred from Chilco east of Vanderhoof, to the smaller Copper City school near Terrace several hundred miles away. Loretta Chisholme lost \$40 annually in pay when she moved from Tatalrose in 1924 south to Wistaria in 1925 although most other transient teachers' salaries remained the same from one school to the next. Significantly, when considering the mobility of all of the teachers, 19 of a total of 57 transfers entailed a move to a school with a smaller enrollment (4 went to schools of the same size), and again 19 of the transfers were to schools with a smaller operating budget (2 went to schools with identical budgets).⁴⁶ Thus, while the majority of transfers reflected the general trend in the province of teachers who moved to larger, wealthier schools for more comfort, the figures

43. A first-class certificate required one year of postsecondary study and one year of normal school. A second-class certificate required one year of normal school and three years of high school. A third-class certificate, abolished in 1922, demanded only one term (four months) at normal school and three years of high school.

44. J.H. Putman and G.M. Weir, *Survey of the School System* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), p. 188.

45. All preceding figures calculated from the Statistical Tables.

46. Five transfers which were a result of school closures and one school with insufficient information were not included in these calculations which were compiled from the Statistical Tables.

also indicated that other personal motives were at work — for example, getting married and dropping out of teaching — or that school boards simply exercised their authority not to rehire a teacher.

It is difficult to find any pattern in the reasons teachers themselves gave for changing schools. Mildred McQuillan took an immediate dislike to Orange Valley School by Fraser Lake, a struggling farming and tie-hacking settlement, and was prepared to leave only two days into her employment.⁴⁷ In “simple but not luxurious” Topley where “no one is really starving to death,” Allan McLuckie found himself “disappointed in his position and not at all interested in his work,” and in Lily Lake, 12 miles south of Fort Fraser, Miss Kathleen V. Munday resigned “apparently for no good reason...and proposes to leave the district at Easter.” Despite being an extremely poor railway stop/tie-hacking/agricultural community with internal political divisions, Engen School posted throughout the 1920s one of the lowest teacher transiency rates in the district — 1.44 years. The district record for teacher retainability, strangely, was in Woodcock, an impoverished mountainous farming and mining settlement south of Hazelton surrounded by Indian villages and populated by just three settler families. Here, Miss Helen M. Hibberd worked for five years even though she boarded one year with a railway construction gang. On the other hand, some higher transiency rates were recorded in relatively large, stable schools in financially secure communities such as Burns Lake and Ellesby, just outside Vanderhoof.⁴⁸ No doubt, the hardship and loneliness were enough to drive some teachers away from a school, but there appears to be no clear pattern to account for teacher mobility.⁴⁹

Relations Between School and Community

The uncertain and scattered nature of the settlements affected schools in a way beyond the control of school boards, inspectors and teachers. In Colleymount, a small community of trappers and prospectors on François Lake, for instance, even before the schoolhouse was completed in 1922, the school closed for seven years because no children were left in the district.⁵⁰ The ongoing pupil exchange between Decker Lake and Palling presented another phenomenon of the district. Both schools experienced high enrollment fluctuations when in the winter, Palling lost families to the tie-hacking camps nearer to Decker Lake, 10 miles away. Once the tie-cutting season was over,

47. McQuillan diary, 1927 (PABC). She, in fact, left Orange Valley at Christmas.

48. The transiency rate for both schools was only one year. Figures calculated from the Statistical Tables.

49. For an examination of patterns of teacher transiency throughout the province, see Wilson and Stortz, “‘May the Lord Have Mercy on You’,” *passim*.

50. Turkki, *Burns Lake*, pp. 229-235.

Palling's school attendance would again jump while Decker Lake school registered a concomitant decrease.⁵¹

Some inspectors and teachers would try to monitor the local population in the hopes of predicting the school's future. South of Kitwanga, in Cedarvale, the school closed for three years when the lumbering operations ceased. In November 1922, Inspector Fraser lamented that "another family is moving away.... School will likely have to be closed." The school opened again in 1926 to children of prospectors and trappers, but attendance remained a problem. In 1928, Miss Lilian Moore wrote in the Teachers' Bureau Records that "I had 4 divisions until Christmas. 2 pupils left for winter. Another has gone trapping until May." Radical fluctuations in attendance showed up in such communities as in Duthie Mines where the number of pupils who attended the school rose from 19 to 21 in 1929, then fell abruptly to 9 in 1930 when the school was forced to close.⁵²

Provincial legislation passed in 1921 made schooling compulsory for children 7 to 15 years of age everywhere in British Columbia. In rural areas, however, little effort was made to enforce such legislation. Often, school attendance was affected by the pupil's continued value as a worker on the homestead or additional source of family income. Extra hands in helping to bring in a harvest, to clear land, or work in a sawmill were critical to the financially-strapped settler. School attendance often took second place to the struggle for family solvency, and the household economy remained an important reality.⁵³ Just south of Smithers, in Telkwa, school attendance was poor throughout the 1920s. At this railway flag stop and centre for trappers, miners, and tie-hackers, the majority of farmers in the population were "badly off" and "attendance poor as farmers keep out boys to help on farms — unable to engage help." Teacher Alfred J. Clotworthy contended in 1928 that the inflated prices for food and rent in Telkwa made for difficult living and, contradicting

51. See the Inspectors' Reports and the Bureau Records for both communities, as well as Turki, *Burns Lake*, pp. 166-181.

52. See the Statistical Tables.

53. The school-age child whose tendency to forsake formal education for labouring on the homestead or earning a few dollars a week (if lucky) at the local mine or sawmill is discussed in two Ontario studies: *In Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict*, Gaffield found that school enrollment among labourers' and farmers' children was "especially limited" in 1880s Prescott County (pp. 124-126); and in an in-depth look at school enrollment and attendance in several Ontario counties in the late nineteenth century, Ian E. Davey found that in rural areas, school attendance was contingent on the fact that the child was too young to contribute to the family's income or that work was not available for the young labourer. "The Rhythm of Work and the Rhythm of School," in Neil McDonald and Alf Chaiton, eds., *Egerton Ryerson and His Times* (Toronto: McMillan, 1978), pp. 221-253. For the paid and unpaid work of children, see Neil Sutherland, "'We always had things to do': The Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s," *Labour/Le travail*, no. 25 (Spring 1990), pp. 105-141.

a recommendation made a year later by Lottie Bowron, cautioned "Salary far too low for a married man — only single teachers should be sent here."⁵⁴

Lack of food and clothing also contributed to truancy. Orange Valley, only two miles from the railway stop of Engen, was the picture of isolation and poverty. The trapping and tie-hacking settlement was a collection of shacks along a long dirt trail, the school was a one-room log cabin and the teacher lived in part of a resident's house, her bedroom cordoned off by a tattered curtain. On one occasion, a local settler visited her for dinner and left with a tin of flour "to save from starvation." The children of one family did not attend school "for they had not a thing for lunch — starving" while another pupil regularly came to school in icy weather without stockings. As well, one day, August Newman [was] away from school this A.M. I asked Cecil his brother where he was and this was his reply: "'—eh—a—a—a—August had to stay home cause he had a hole in his p—p—p—pants.'"⁵⁵

An added dimension was the variety of ethnic groups among the settlers. The largest ethnic group in the district was British (43 percent of the 9,908 residents), followed by sprinklings of French, Dutch, Finnish, German, Polish, Scandinavian, and "Orientals". A third of all the people in the district were native Indian, but only 31 of the 3,312 Indians were not living on reserves,⁵⁶ and they normally attended church-run day or residential schools. Though the communities were ethnically and culturally diverse, there were no bloc settlements as on the prairies, and no Roman Catholic separate schools as in Ontario, Alberta or Saskatchewan. Thus, Catholic children attended the local public school. For this district, at any rate, no evidence exists to suggest that social strife or tension between teacher and community was caused by differences that were ethnically or racially-based.⁵⁷

School Finances and Schoolhouse Conditions

While school administrators in Victoria seemingly failed to appreciate the economic basis of attendance problems derived from community impoverishment, they did not entirely neglect the reality of local insolvency. According to the *Public Schools Act*, in assisted school districts, the teacher's salary was to be paid by the Minister of Finance and the cost of the erection of the schoolhouse, once completed, was to be defrayed by the Provincial Treasury.⁵⁸ In assisted school districts without local assessment (and between

54. Bureau Records, March 1923.

55. McQuillan diary, 1927.

56. See the 1931 *Census*, vol. II, pp. 490-491 for a breakdown of the ethnicity among the population of the district.

57. For a discussion of the problems associated with teaching in communities populated predominantly by groups of immigrants, see J.D. Wilson, "The Visions of Ordinary Participants", pp. 39-55.

58. Office of the Provincial Secretary, *The Revised Statutes of British Columbia*, III, Victoria, B.C., 1924, Chapter 226, Sections 25 and 31.

1915 and 1930, in the area from Terrace to Vanderhoof, one-quarter of all schools were so classified), "the building in which the public school is held, as well as the furnishings and the incidental expenses in connection with the maintenance of the school shall be provided by the voluntary contribution of parents and others interested...." In assisted school districts with local assessment, a property tax was levied on the residents according to the school's particular needs. The money raised was to be used to supplement the work of the voluntary labour necessary to construct and maintain the school.⁵⁹ Between 1918 and 1930, the average contribution paid by the communities with tax assessment was only \$221.57 with a recorded low of \$13.10 paid by Fort Fraser in 1919 and a high of \$1,239.07 paid by the residents of Quick in 1922.⁶⁰ Local financial conditions ensured great variety, to say the least, in teachers' working conditions. While the *Public Schools Act* offered a financial base on which to establish a school and hire a teacher, it left the future of the school to the mercy of local material constraints.

As a result, schoolhouse conditions varied enormously in quality. Copper City's school was "crude", a small frame building with broken windows and no toilets which prompted Inspector Fraser finally to advocate in 1929 the erection of a new building. In "pioneer" Decker Lake where extreme temperatures meant -50 degrees F on some winter days, the log school was "in need of great improvement", in particular for the holes in its walls. Nithi River, an isolated farm and tie-hacking community south of Endako, was constantly harangued by the inspector for unimproved school conditions which included a "fair-sized" frame building with a classroom that was bare, dirty, "unattractive", and with holes in its walls.⁶¹ In 1921, Inspector Gower wrote that the Nechako school had no ventilation, a dirty room and no water. Two years later, the Teachers' Bureau Records recorded that the "Building is a small one. Draughty. Ceiling too low...grounds unimproved.... School is not well equipped." Numerous other schools were in poor condition, had "rough" and "unimproved" grounds, and were held in various types of buildings such as an Anglican Church, vacant house, government road building, and local hotel.⁶²

59. *Ibid.*, Chapter 226, Sections 110 and 199 to 222.

60. The average operating budget (which included the teacher's salary) for all the one-room schools in the district was \$1,179.49. All figures calculated from the Statistical Tables.

61. Bureau Records, 1923 and 1928; and see the Inspectors' Reports for 1920, 1921, 1923, 1925 and 1926.

62. As examples, see McQuillan diary for her description of Orange Valley School as the "cell"; Bureau Records and Inspectors' Reports for: Engen, when in 1920 the school was held in a room in a nearby hotel; Fort Fraser, where "A small frame building...is used as a schoolhouse in this district. 36 children are crowded in a class-room, that is suitable for about half that number. A new building is long overdue" (Inspectors' Reports, 1925); Fraser Lake: "The building in which this school is held is not fit for human habitation" (Inspectors' Reports, 1922); and North Bulkley which had a short-lived "primitive" school with unfenced grounds on a riverbank.

Other communities provided fine school buildings, sometimes, significantly, in extremely impoverished areas. Despite its isolation and dependency on trapping and small farming, in 1923, Fort St. James erected a large, well-lit and ventilated frame building with a painted porch, papered classroom and closet space. Even the grounds were cleared, which prompted Gower to write in 1925 that “the school property is a credit to the district.” Uncha Valley was a struggling farming and trapping community, but one which “takes a deep interest in the affairs of the school” with corresponding results: a large, clean and well-lit school equipped to the hilt with a library which in 1929 contained over 200 volumes.⁶³ Schoolhouse conditions varied considerably just miles apart. While only nine miles north of one of the worst schoolhouses in the district, in 1923, Fort Fraser North School was “creditable”, according to Gower, being newly painted, clean, and equipped with good light and ventilation.

Community Politics

While settlement patterns, transiency, and the poverty of each community affected in certain degrees schoolhouse conditions, enrollment, and attendance, local politics, driven by the whims and caprices of the participants, was another significant factor of variability in teaching conditions. Throughout the 1920s, the settlements between Terrace and Vanderhoof were outstanding examples of enclosed communities rather impervious to outside economic and social influences. Because the communication and transportation networks were unreliable, each settlement virtually became a separate little society. Each community consequently resembled a sub-culture of its own, a situation which inevitably forced the teacher to adapt to its priorities.

As discussed previously, the lack of checks built into the *Public Schools Act* for the maintenance of remote schools created a wide variety of school conditions. Some small, isolated but “progressive” communities had residents who would “do anything for the benefit of the teacher”;⁶⁴ they organized “building bees” of volunteers who gathered to construct the school,⁶⁵ and held basket socials where lunches prepared by the teachers were auctioned, with the money collected treated as donations towards the upkeep of the local school.⁶⁶ On the other hand, several communities demonstrated a clear lack of support for the school, quite apart from the state of the local economy. Decker Lake settlers took three years to clear a playground for the school, and in

63. Inspectors' Reports, 1929.

64. Bureau Records, Uncha Valley, 1923. For schools supported by similarly cooperative settlers, see Bureau Records and Inspectors' Reports for Fort Fraser North, Sheraton, Palling, and Driftwood Creek. See also Turkki, *Burns Lake* for Omineca in Rose Lake, p. 181.

65. For example, see Turkki, *Burns Lake*, pp. 184-190 for Bulkley South School.

66. See Evelyn School's basket social in A. George Shephard, “History of Schools in School District No. 54,” PABC, 1971.

François Lake South, it took three years before the dilapidated school building was finally abandoned on the recommendation of the inspector.⁶⁷

School support was unpredictable because the isolated societies were based on weak social hierarchies. Very limited opportunities existed to accumulate financial resources; each settler was more or less on a similar economic plane. Tie-hackers, farmers, trappers, and prospectors all had a common economic struggle, and social position was dependent on personal criteria. Decreased social range, Cole Harris suggests, created "a weaker sense of the social whole...a stronger sense of the individual"⁶⁸ than in the more urban regions of the province. School policy ultimately was dependent on personal interests.

The local school board's powers were extensive. Its duty was to assess the community for taxation, select the site of the schoolhouse through community consensus, supervise the building of the school and acquire its equipment, provide health inspection for the pupils, and hire and fire the teacher.⁶⁹

In many settlements in the region, trustees were probably elected on the basis of their personal standing in the community, perhaps their fluency in English. Given the small size of some of the communities and the paucity of interested candidates, the prospective trustee may have been named by acclamation. Several school boards had a founding settler as a trustee which seemed to indicate that a route to power was not in dollars or land, but by length of residence.⁷⁰ The Board ultimately represented the local people, not the Department of Education, and as a result, was subject to the forces which shaped the local society. Thus, disputes within and without the school board were common and major issues often provoked conflict.

In these isolated and inward-looking settlements, personal and family problems often became community concerns or other people's business. Social schisms frequently erupted. Selecting a school site could be an explosive affair. To stem a community fight, a resident in Decker Lake obtained a land map, plotted the homes of the families whose children were attending school and pin-pointed the centre of the area encompassed by the homes.⁷¹ The divisive situation in Orange Valley was even more intense; the school was

67. Inspectors' Reports, 1920 to 1923 for both schools.

68. Cole Harris, "Reflections on the Surface of a Pond: A Review Article," *BC Studies*, no. 49 (Spring 1981), p. 92.

69. *Revised Statutes*, Chapter 226, Sections 102 and 133.

70. Many local histories remark on the integral role of the first settlers who shaped local school policy. See especially Turkki, *Burns Lake* for South Bulkley School, p. 184; Colleymount School, pp. 229-240; and Grassy Plains, pp. 249-260; for Palling and Southbank schools, see the South Side Centennial Committee, "Story of a North-Central Settlement," PABC; and see Shephard, "History of Schools," PABC, for Round Lake School.

71. Turkki, *Burns Lake*, p. 166.

burned down twice in the early 1920s, ostensibly because some residents were dissatisfied with its location. In Palling, a dispute at an annual meeting “developed into rowdy discussion and from there into a free fight in which ratepayers became involved.”⁷²

Teacher and Community

On numerous occasions, community disputes directly involved the teacher. Mrs. Alice Steele recalled the problems created in Rose Lake, north of Palling, where two factions split the community in half with two or three families on each side. If the teacher had dinner in one house, in order to keep peace in the community, she had to accept an invitation at the neighbours'. She could not date just one local boy without being branded as playing favourites. The first thing she learned when she taught in remote communities was diplomacy: “Don't gossip, and don't say one thing about one family to another.”⁷³

In some areas, diplomacy was ineffective. In her reports, Lottie Bowron frequently alluded to outright community antipathy towards the teacher. Although “the fact that [the teacher] had (in most cases) immediate ties with the far away cities clothed them with an aura of mystery and sophistication that fascinated and enslaved their rustic pupils,”⁷⁴ this was not always an attitude shared by the parents or other settlers in the community. Often, the teacher was treated like a second-class citizen, an outsider at the mercy of the demands and standards of the community.⁷⁵ The settlers seemed to have regarded the teacher as a worker over whom they had every right to dictate. So, while Victoria expected the teacher to serve as a community leader, at the local level, she tended to be looked on as a community servant. For example, she was expected to organize an elaborate Christmas concert every year and chaperone dances. Moreover, the respect for and status of the teacher could present a model for other women to emulate and as such, innovation in social relations was hardly desirable and had to be curbed; otherwise, it presented a threat to the established social order.

Animosity toward the teacher was common when, at times, she must have exuded an almost alien urban presence.⁷⁶ As a result, the teacher was susceptible to an inordinate amount of criticism which often represented a way

72. *Ibid.*, p. 181. For an interesting example of community infighting in Chilco in 1915, see John Calam, ed., *Alex Lord's British Columbia: Recollections of a Rural School Inspector, 1915-36* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991), pp. 55-56.

73. Interview with Mrs. George A. Steele (retired schoolteacher), Vancouver, 13 November 1987.

74. Mould, *Stumpfarms*, p. 117.

75. For a Russian comparison from the Czarist period, see Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1861-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

76. Jacques Dorion makes some provocative speculations along these lines in *Les écoles de rang au Québec* (Montréal: Éditions de l'homme, 1979), pp. 233-263.

of supervising the teacher's conduct, morally and otherwise. In 1930, Lottie Bowron, the Rural Teachers' Welfare Officer, was summoned by Miss Gwendolyn Lang, the teacher in Engen, to investigate unwelcome boarding conditions. Bowron wrote that she visited many people in the settlement and "During this time I heard a great many tales and could see that the district was badly divided, the teacher coming in for her share of both friends and opponents." Without elaboration, Bowron stated that "Engen has been a difficult school district for some time and much could be said in regard to some of the unpleasant things that have occurred there recently but I am hopeful that most of the teacher's problems have been removed."⁷⁷ In tiny Lily Lake, twelve miles south of Fort Fraser, Bowron reported that the teacher, Miss Mary Burton,

had written to me in January saying she would like to see me and discuss matters. Evidently, she had been going through a very trying time indeed. She said it had affected the efficiency of her work and, on that account, seemed greatly worried.... The criticism of the Board, which she felt was against her, and the fact that the community had two factions, made life very difficult for her.⁷⁸

Lily Lake was a good example of a community of subsistence farmers and trappers which by its isolation, poverty and local politics intensified the loneliness and frustration of the teacher.

Teacher image and reputation were important factors in such closeknit communities. Mildred McQuillan who started smoking cigarettes shortly after her arrival in Orange Valley took extensive measures to hide the habit from the local residents.⁷⁹ In Alexander Manson School, in the remote Ootsa Lake settlement, a teacher's dismissal was pending because of local opposition to the company she kept. Bowron wrote

Miss Beechy is...engaged to a man whom the community does not care about, and this man spends far too much time in Miss Beechy's house, having his meals there, etc., and this, with some school problems has caused the trouble.

I called on...one of the trustees who informed me that the Board was going to dismiss her...and I believe [it is] willing to give her an opportunity to resign.⁸⁰

Of course, some communities were socially harmonious, they gave the teacher no trouble, and the teacher was well-liked and respected in the school. But not to empathize with McQuillan is difficult when, on an evening in December 1927, she was finally ready to leave Orange Valley for home. She finished dinner with the family with whom she boarded, then "there was an

77. Bowron Reports, Engen, February 1930.

78. *Ibid.*, Lily Lake, March 1929.

79. McQuillan diary, 1927.

80. Bowron Reports, Alexander Manson, September 1931. Miss Beechy did not return to the school the following year.

argument as to how and who was taking me to the train; no one at all keen which was not so pleasant for me.⁸¹

Substantial evidence exists to suggest that the teacher was not always treated fairly, or in McQuillan's case, with dignity, but nowhere is the hardship for the teacher more apparent than in her living accommodation. Whether the teacher lived in a log cabin, shack, hotel, restaurant, farmhouse, railway station, store, teacherage, or boarded with a family,⁸² with few exceptions throughout the district the accommodation was very poor. At the best of times, living conditions reflected local poverty. As an essential criterion for community acceptance, she was expected to adapt readily to unfamiliar conditions. Large families took in teachers for rent money, but, at times, offered the teacher only a bed separated from the rest of the house by a curtain.⁸³ Other communities refused outright to board the teachers, which left them to find makeshift quarters elsewhere, sometimes miles from the school. In Decker Lake, one family, the Pichés, who rented rooms to travelling tie-hackers, usually had control over teacher accommodation. With few beds to spare in the entire community, overnight guests shared a bed while the teacher slept with Mrs. Piché, and Mr. Piché slept on the couch.

The teachers had all been female until one year when the School Board sent a replacement without advising Mrs. Piché as to whether the teacher was male or female. After preparing her room as usual, she opened the door to a young gentleman and was so non-plussed that she sent him away.⁸⁴

According to the 1923 Bureau Records, the teacher in question, George Atkinson, finally settled in a residence two miles from school.

Bowron frequently commented on the teacher's living conditions, sometimes in relation to community problems. In several settlements, Bowron warned prospective teachers that the area was lonely and isolated with few opportunities for exciting leisure activities.⁸⁵ With an acute lack of recreational and social facilities in which to pass the time, the teacher was often restricted

81. McQuillan diary, 1927. For other examples of communities which were unpleasant for the teacher, see Bureau Records, Inspectors' Reports, and Bowron Reports, especially for Duthie Mines, François Lake, and tiny Marten Lake where according to the 1928 Bureau Records, "people seem to have been at loggerheads with each other," while in March 1929, Bowron believed that the teacher "has been through perhaps more than the usual amount of criticism."

82. Out of 56 responses in the Bureau Records that dealt with living accommodation in the district, 26 teachers recorded that they boarded with a private family, and the second largest group, 8 "batched" in a small cabin.

83. See McQuillan diary, 1927, and the Bowron Reports for Marten Lake, Southbank, and Tchesinkut Lake where Miss Ellen Murray had to share a small house with nine children (Bowron Reports, September 1931).

84. Turkki, *Burns Lake*, p. 167.

85. See Bowron Reports, especially for Tchesinkut Lake, François Lake, Uncha Valley, and extremely isolated Nadina River where the loneliness was compounded by unfriendly residents; Lily Lake, Marten Lake, settler-transient Bulkley South, Perow, Glentanna, Woodcock, Cedarvale, and Copper City.

to the occasional dance sometimes miles away in a larger community or to visiting residents in nearby settlements. Here, the teacher had to be at her diplomatic best because such infrequent encounters with a large group of local people helped to make or break a teacher's chance of acceptance in the community.⁸⁶

Having some sort of social life in a remote community was imperative if the teacher was to survive in a one-room school. The teacher could not remain aloof from other residents, which was especially the case considering the male to female ratio in the district. In 1931, 5,735 males were recorded as opposed to 4,143 females. For the entire census district, 50.2 percent of the men 15 years of age and older were single.⁸⁷ The large proportion of bachelors in the population was likely a result of the character of the district with its reliance upon subsistence and transient economic activity. The young, single female teacher became a target of the bachelors where, at a dance, "the local schoolma'am, often the only unmarried adult female in attendance, was invariably the 'belle of the ball' and from the point of view of the males, a Saturday night, was a dismal failure if [she] failed to show up."⁸⁸ The teacher's basket lunches at auctions often fetched a premium. In 1920, in François Lake, for example, the teacher's basket was bought for \$35 (the equivalent of a month's rent) when a group of bachelors got together and tried to outbid the teacher's boyfriend, a police constable in the district.⁸⁹ Conversely, Mrs. Mary McIntosh in "unco-operative" Tatalrose School was edged out of her job when a pressure group of local tie-hacking bachelors at a public meeting requested that she be dismissed because "there were many unmarried teachers out of work."⁹⁰

Conclusion

The foregoing study has focused on the public and private lives of the rural school teacher. Despite the generally poor living and working conditions, many teachers enjoyed the experience of being able to establish a degree of autonomy and independence. Most soon moved on to other locations, but some married and settled down in the region. There is no denying the disparity between rural and urban schools. Yet, as rural school conditions remained much the same throughout the 1920s, education officials continued to overlook the needs of rural society itself.⁹¹

86. The teacher was scrutinized at the dances by the local people, and visiting, or what McQuillan termed the "merry-go-round", was an important part of adapting to local politics. See the McQuillan diary for an interesting description of the activity of "visiting".

87. See the 1931 *Census*, vol. II, pp. 249, 270-271, 278-287. Unfortunately, marital figures for our district (Census District 8e, f, and g) are unavailable.

88. Mould, *Stumpfarms*, p. 126.

89. Turkki, *Burns Lake*, p. 246.

90. Bureau Records, 1928, and Bowron Reports, September 1931. See also Shephard, "History of Schools," PABC, 1971.

91. Wilson and Stortz, "May the Lord Have Mercy on You," *passim*.

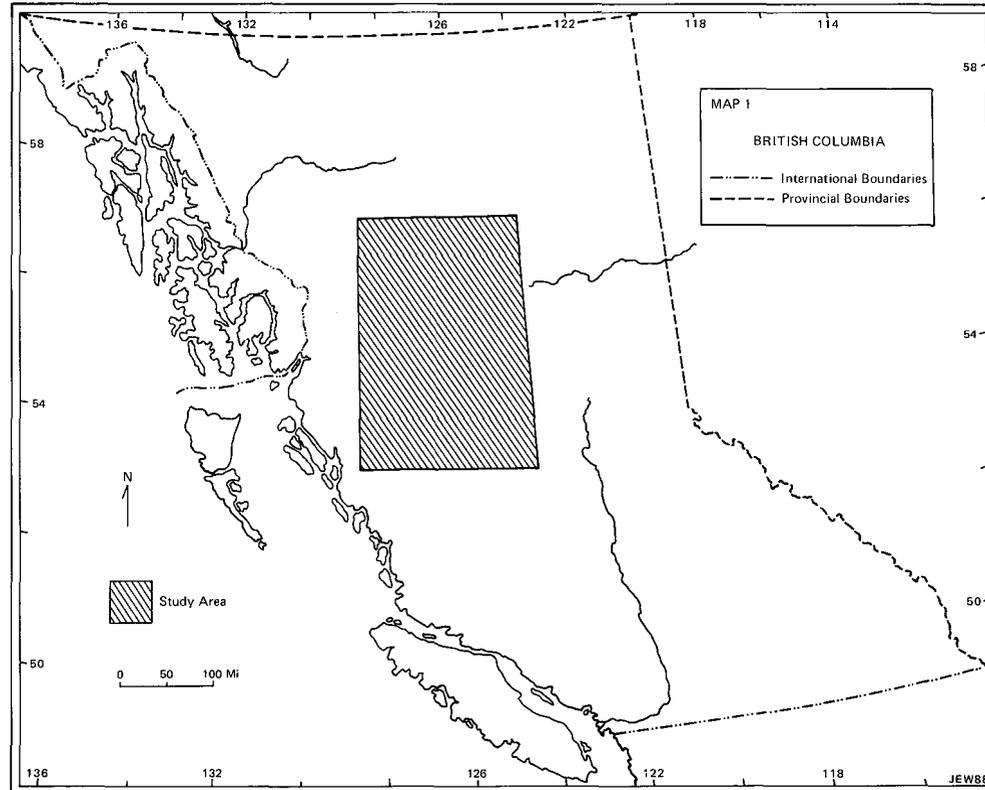
Economics had a large part to play in determining how effective the “rural-minded” teacher might be. Parents and school trustees were often responding to their economic bottom line in the ways in which they reacted to schools and teachers. While they wanted education for their children, they also had to survive in what amounted for many to frontier conditions. For their parts, teachers had not only to contend with difficult material conditions and often irascible and interfering parents and trustees, but also the inspector who represented Victoria. In terms of local politics, school boards probably did the best they could given local economies and relationships between families in sparse and isolated settlements.

The one-room school between Terrace and Vanderhoof provides an excellent case study of rural education. From the establishment of the first school in 1906 to the spread of the one-room schools throughout the district in the 1920s, school conditions were similar in many respects to those found elsewhere in rural British Columbia and across Canada. Many one-room schools in both this district and more generally suffered from a preponderance of unsuitable teachers, teacher transiency, and generally poor living and working conditions. This look at a small group of schools in a geographically-constricted area also demonstrates that teaching in a one-room school was an arduous task. For that reason alone, teacher transiency can be readily understood. The case study also supports the contention that the education officials’ perceptions of the rural school problem were fundamentally misguided.⁹² As rural school conditions remained much the same throughout the 1920s, the education officials continued to overlook the importance in the equation of rural society itself. “Rural-minded” teachers had little chance for success in communities which were impoverished, scattered, and transient, as well as with settlers who were at times obstinate in school affairs, and who saw the local school as their school. They had built it, after all, in many cases on land donated by a local resident, and they were resistant to directions from Victoria.

A study of rural teachers and schools also invites research into non-educational questions. Community conditions as well as the economic and social behaviour of its members become important considerations. The school becomes the vehicle to explore rural life itself and thus the resulting research shines light not only onto aspects of educational history but into rural history as well.

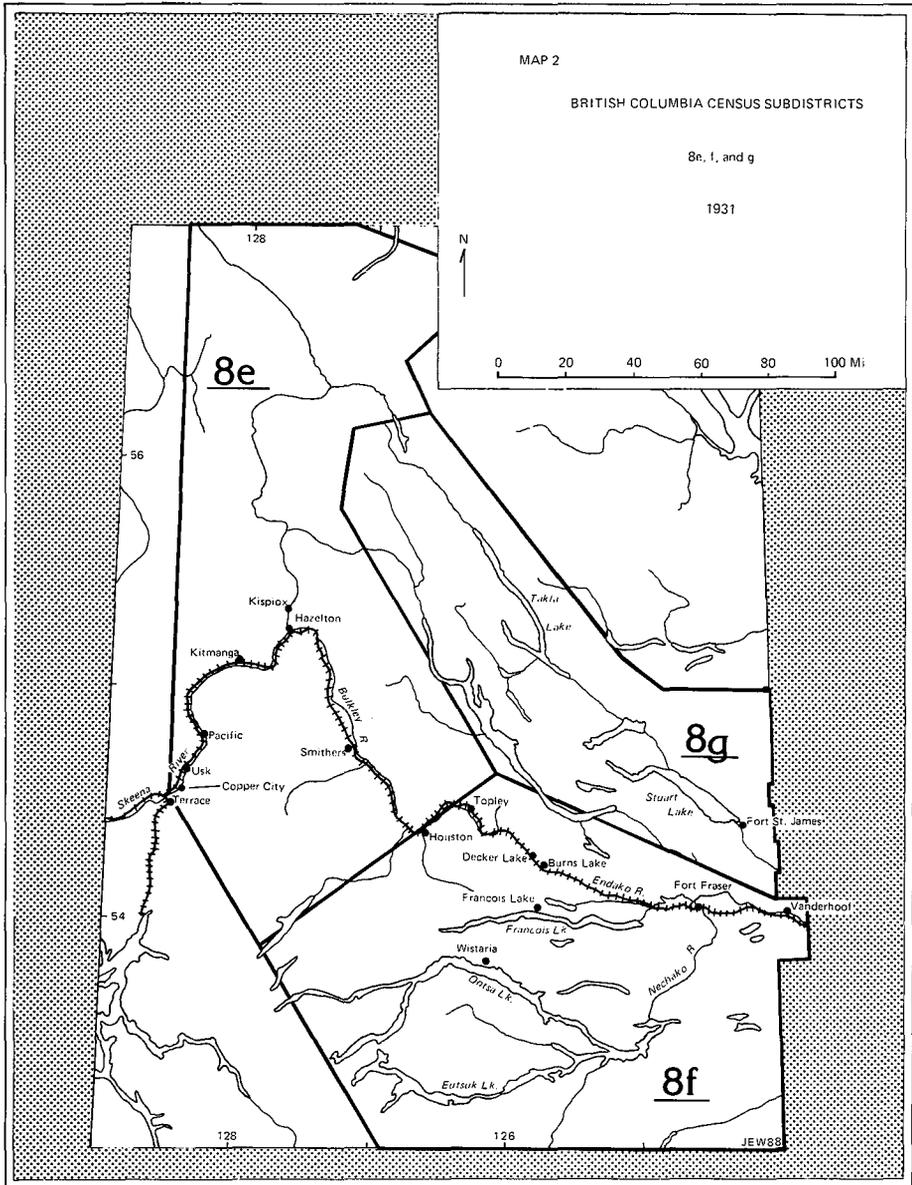
92. *Ibid.*

MAP 1



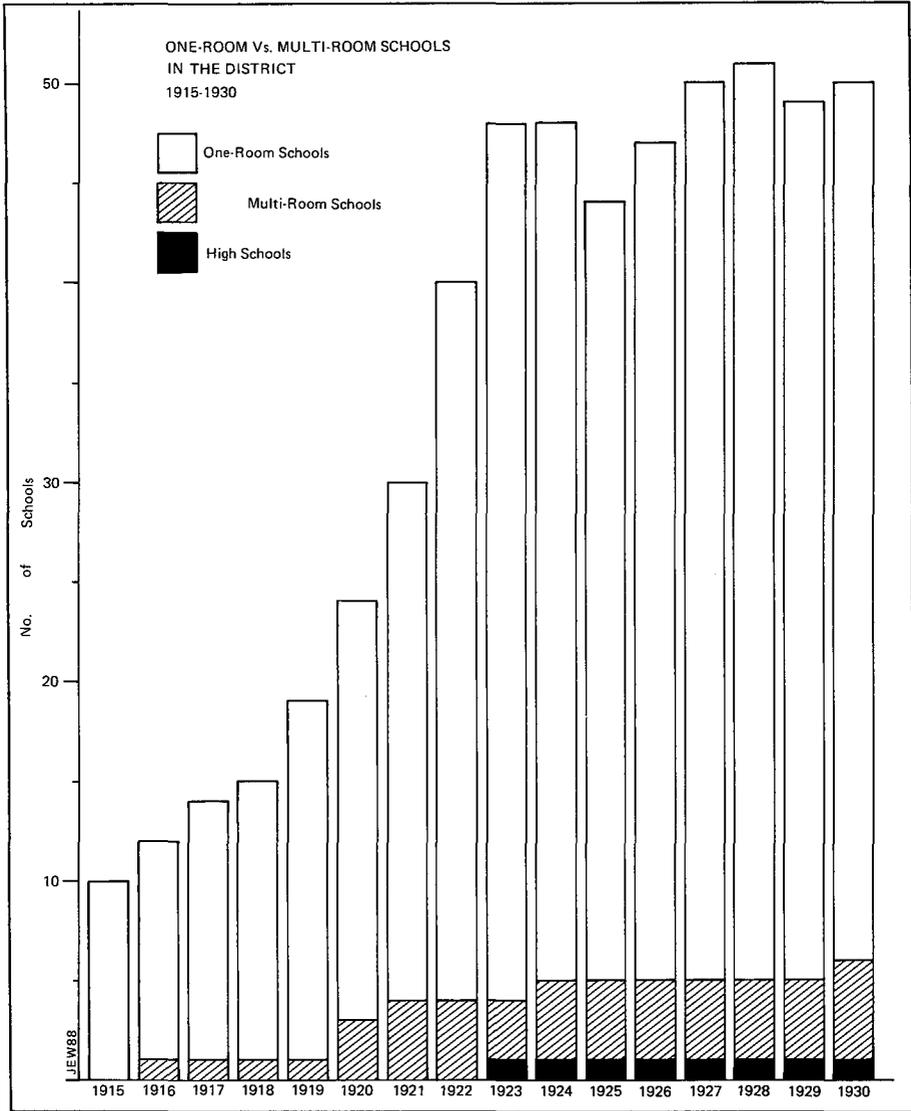
Source: Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, volume 1 (1936).

MAP 2



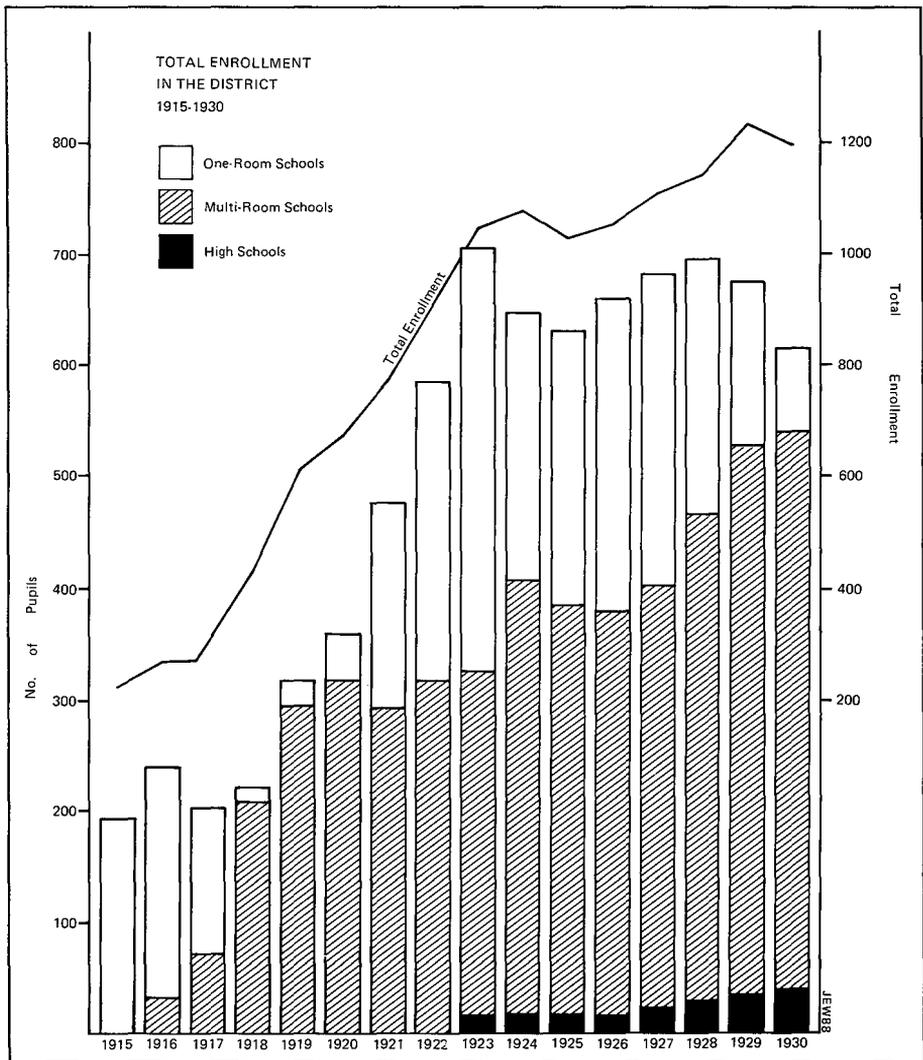
Source: Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, volume 1 (1936).

Fig. 1



Source: British Columbia, Department of Education, *Annual Report of the Public Schools* (1905-1931).

Fig. 2



Source: British Columbia, Department of Education, *Annual Report of the Public Schools (1905-1931)*.