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MY MEMOIRS

RECOLLECTIONS OF PIONEER LIFE

IN BEAR LAKE VALLEY

Written by Walter Edward Clark

Chapter XV

CONSOLIDATION OF THE COUNTY SCHOOLS

When the County Commissioners appointed me Superintendent of County Schools on May 28, 1947 to complete the term ending January 3, 1949, I was asked to spend two days a week in the office. Up to this time the Superintendent had usually been a teacher who spent only Saturday as an office day. The chief responsibility had been bookkeeping. This phase of the work was not easy for me and was time consuming.

Sentiment was changing regarding the function of the County Superintendent of Schools, the efficiency of the small school, and there was a demand for a county school reorganization committee and designated the County superintendent of Public Instruction as the executive secretary. This increased the work several fold with no advance in salary. Perhaps that is why I was asked to serve, for doing public service willingly just for the sake of doing service had become an established principle with me.

As an example of the problems presented to me, I will list a few: Tory Austin of Liberty, as a teacher, taxpayer and one interested in education asked my opinion about improvements at the Liberty School. I suggested the district lock the school house, keep the equipment, and bus their students to Paris for one year, and then make a decision. They did, and then continued to go to Paris. The Liberty District paid the transportation and tuition. Another district wanted to employ a teacher with only a permit, but were not allowed to because a certified teacher had applied. (The teacher with only a permit was an experienced teacher.) I asked if she would accept employment elsewhere, and the answer was “No.” I suggested they just delay employing a teacher in the hopes the certificated teacher would accept employment elsewhere. The suggestion was followed with the desired results. I knew Robert Clayton and his wife were seeking the change of locations, so suggested to the Georgetown School Board that they offer them an increase in salary and employ them. Robert had both Owen and Nolan as students. He was a good organizer as well as a good teacher.

On one project I was compelled to back down. I suggested having a county-wide test for the pupils’ eyes, and arranged for an occultist to come in the county for that purpose. The Optometrist Association had the county Attorney call on me and inform me the Idaho statures prohibited discrimination against an optometrist. There was an optometrist in the valley. He proved to be very competent.

It was in the field of reorganization that I devoted my time and energies. It was not hard for me to neglect the farm work when there were things more to my liking to be accomplished, namely reorganization of the Bear Lake County schools.

SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

In 1947 there were 22 districts with 75 school board members in Bear Lake County, which has had a very permanent population of about 10,000 people. About one third resided in Montpelier, one third on the west side of the valley, including Paris –the county seat and headquarters for the Bear Lake L.D.S. Stake. The need for financial adjustment was evident. Districts along the railroad, like Eightmile, Nouan, Georgetown, Dingle, and Pegram had a large tax base while communities like Geneva, Bloomington, and Sharon were handicapped. Parents in Bloomington were making a contribution to maintain an eight month school. The schools varied from seven to nine months, from one teacher to the grade to one teacher to the school. Ruel Kunz, an experienced teacher, had a large family and his services were in demand so as to bring a small community school population up to the minimum. The quality of education varied, but each community was proud of its school. In fact, a uniform standard from which to judge quality was non-existent.

The board met and decided to hold a series of meetings to explain the objectives and problems connected with reorganization. The first meeting was held in Georgetown and I was asked to explain the objectives. At all future meetings I received the same assignment. This tended to identify with me the unpopular idea of change, which every locality except Montpelier felt would be to their disadvantage. The west side of the valley wanted a district to include the present Fielding High school district, but with a larger tax base. But no one could, or at least would, suggest a plan that would accomplish that result. It was recognized that Eightmile students should be transported to Soda Springs, with the district that included Eightmile paying the transportation and tuition cost. That was acceptable to Eightmile residents.

Consolidation was a separate problem. The first plan proposed was for elementary schools at St. Charles, Paris, and Ovid for the west side children; at Geneva, Dingle, and Montpelier for the east; and Georgetown for the north area. I was asked to make a house to house canvas in Liberty to determine the wishes of the people. They wanted to continue going to Paris and were very opposed to going to Ovid. St. Charles patrons were fearful that they may be assigned to go to Paris. Bloomington, with a large number of young people, wanted a school continued in their building. The grandparents knew conditions were better than they had had and did not want any change. Parents, in some instances, feared for a moral standards of their children if they associated with children of other communities. Local leaders thought consolidation would end community activity. Charges and counter charges were made. One board member branded me as a Communist, the meanest or degrading term he knew. It was not surprising that my services were terminated by a defeat in the November elections. The day my term ended –January 3, 1949, I enrolled at Utah State University for a class in school finance under Superintendent Vest, a course in juvenile delinquency under Dr. Symons. Why I entered school so late in life is hard to determine, but it prepared me for the work ahead.

September 1949, for the fourth time, I joined the Georgetown teaching staff. A Mr. Peterson was principal of the high school. The limitations of a small high school became evident, and April 21, 1950, by a mall majority of a large attendance at the annual school meeting, it was voted to send the Georgetown High School students to the Montpelier High School. This was a step towards consolidation and helped the reorganization movement, which was at a standstill.

A reorganization meeting was advertised to be held in the Montpelier High School building. I had not planned to attend –in fact had forgotten about it. I was in Montpelier on business and was asked if I was there to attend the meeting, so I attended. James Olson in substance said, “I still think one district is the best, but impossible to attain and I propose we organize two districts in the county.” I immediately arose and said, “I must have more patience than Bishop Olson. I think we can have one district. It takes time for people to change their point of view. Let us continue to work for what we

believe to be best." The meeting broke up without any actions being taken. As I left the building Rudolph Bienz commented to me, "We should elect you to the legislature." Fortunately public reaction against my ideas did not deter me. The independence I have always had led me not to care what people thought or said. Ellsworth Clark once told me I was the most talked about man in town. I replied, "They are not hurting me as much as themselves."

OPERATION OF A NEW SCHOOL DISTRICT

October 21, 1952 an election to organize the entire county into one district carried. Whatever my contribution many have been it came as a result of my following President Edward C. Rich's advice: "Walter, prepare to teach." I was appointed a board meeting of the newly organized school district, and school again became my major concern. The other board members were Paul Haddock from the south of Center Street in Paris, Alfred Shepherd from the area north of Center Street in Paris, Lyman Barrett from west Montpelier, and Eldon Cook from extreme east of Montpelier and communities south and east of Montpelier and two from Paris. The East-West story was being enacted in Bear Lake County. It was settled peacefully, but it took a long period of time.

On January 17, 1953 I attended a Board meeting. I remember the maneuvering in the organization of the board. Alfred Shepherd nominated Eldon Cook as temporary chairman (I wondered, "Why not chairman?") Eldon Cook immediately called for the nomination of a chairman and I nominated Eldon Cook. Paul Haddock followed with the nomination of Alfred Shepherd. The secret ballot, which was no secret, was two and two. It was evident Alfred had voted for himself. To break the tie, Eldon voted for himself. Eldon Cook was soon elected State Senator and I became chairman in September, 1954 –a position I held until May 21, 1957.

CHAIRMAN OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

There were many problems and few presidents to follow. The employment of a superintendent, the determination of the responsibilities of the principals, the establishment of a salary schedule, transrenovation were problems that needed immediate action. The jealousies, fears, and prejudices between east and west and even between communities surprised me. The failure of the west, when it had the larger population to fully cooperate in bridging Bear River, and the failure of the east to do the same when they had the larger population; the attempt to remove the county seat from Paris to Montpelier; the location of the county fair grounds (at one time the arrangement was to alternate the location); plus many personal issues had all left scars. I often suggested compromise and I held the balance of power. I maintained education was the State's responsibility and I represented the State, not a small district. The instruction to me from the state was to watch out for the interests of the small schools, for the bigger would take care of themselves.

We tried not to make any immediate radical changes in the local school procedure. For the first year we tolerated what I thought was an injustice; Fielding High School had been transporting the ball players home after games, including some from Garden City and Pickleville, the players provided their own way home. The next year all athletes were transported.

It was reported that Fielding High School attendance reports for state appropriation had included the student from Utah. I did not check that, but replied, "The school should practice honesty as well as teach it." I do not recall that any tuition for Utah students was paid by Utah to Idaho, but in the future the student residing in Utah attended the smaller high school in Laketown, Utah.

The school board employed a team of educators to come study our problems and make recommendations. Their preliminary report was the 6-3-3 plan, but after more study of the conflicting social issues they recommended the 6-6 plan for both Montpelier and Paris, with the 6-3-3 plan as an alternate plan. I opposed the 6-6 plan, fearing the older students would dominate the programs, sports, recreations, and general activity of the

school, and the students in the eighth and ninth grades would be neglected as they had been in the past. I also felt that appeasement was the cause of the change in the recommendation in the final report from the preliminary report, and that the committee had thought the alternate, preliminary plan to be the better. Other educators complimented me for the stand I took.

September 30, 1955 the Washington School in Montpelier was destroyed by fire. The cause was never determined. The building program now became the main issue. Part of the Montpelier students were transported to vacant rooms in outlying but nearby school buildings; other were crowded into the old high school building which was not in good condition. I proposed as a long range program the construction of two elementary building in Montpelier, one to be built immediately with facilities to provide lunches for students coming from outside of Montpelier. But I readily yielded to the desire of Montpelier to have one centrally located school. Many, led by Loyd Sleight of Georgetown, favored a twelve room building that would retain the status quo. Montpelier people wanted a twenty-four classroom building.

I wrote several articles for the press. The News-Examiner was very cooperative. The Paris Post was noncommittal. The following is selected from one of the articles I wrote. "Several persons from various parts of the county have approached me about the feasibility of the construction of a new high school near Ovid. I have not favored the proposition. The cost is prohibitive, estimated by a competent architect at over a million dollars...police protection, fire protection, water supply, etc., must be considered. Transportation for all is a bigger problem than transportation for a part."

"My training, observation, and reading all favor...small neighbor elementary schools, medium size junior high schools, and large senior high schools... There is a practical necessity of maintaining a balance in the district. Elementary school in the larger communities, a junior high school at Paris, and a senior high school at Montpelier not only establishes a balance, but it utilizes the present buildings. The present Montpelier high school building is strictly a senior school plant. Fielding high school can readily be adapted for junior high school service."

This added fuel to the flames. Most of the Fielding High School patrons felt they were on the defensive and were ready to fight to maintain the high school in Paris. The proposed plan thwarted the twenty-four room elementary building desired by Montpelier. It seemed everybody opposed the transportation of elementary school students. I committed myself to favoring an eighteen classroom building, and refused to budge. It was not a compromise from my point of view. My announced reason was that it was the minimum Montpelier needed. My real reason was two-fold: (1) A twenty-four classroom building would have supplied Montpelier's needs and they may not be willing to provide equal advantages to other areas, and more important, the smaller communities may be content with what they had. (2) A twenty-four room building thwarted my vision of a junior high school school at Paris and a senior high school at Montpelier. The outcome was my defeat by Loyd Sleight on May 21, 1957, but the other members of the Board continued with the building program a we had planned and an eighteen room elementary school, given the name of A. J. Winters School, and a vocational agriculture-mechanical arts building was dedicated on December 30, 1959. There had been little or no opposition to the Agricultural and Mechanical building as it was welcomed by the rural areas, and Fielding High School patrons had some time before provided similar facilities.

It was a relief to be relieved of the responsibility without being a quitter. It was a satisfaction to know I had given the cause my best efforts and I received encouragement and expressions of appreciations for my efforts from many. After explaining the problems and proposed solutions to the Montpelier Chamber of Commerce one member commented, "It is evident that is your baby."

School board members and staff, on June 10, 1957, adopted and published the following resolution: "We the Members of the Board of Trustees of Bear

Lake County, wish to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to our retiring member, Mr. Walter E. Clark, for his untiring devotion to the development of better education for the youth of this district and his efforts to provide better facilities for those engaged in teaching of our youth. His knowledge of the problems which this district has faced and his direction as Chairman of the Board for a solution to these problems has brought about a better educational system for our county. For these contributions to our society and for many others which could be mentioned, we are very grateful for his services."

A clerk, Amos Hulme, once publicly said, "His home school got no more or less consideration than other schools." Taft Budge, a board member in a small town said, "Your have a friend in Walter Clark; one who is concerned with the welfare of the small communities." My youngest son, in 1967, wrote a tribute to his father under the title of "The Stranger." Four of these lines read:

Oft times his plans are strong indeed;

Too new and bold for friends and peers.

His forward look has caused him pain.

He's oft a stranger for his sight.

I did not realize my children understood my inner feelings.

Before the adoption of the junior high school program there was another attempt to make two high schools in the district permanent. An extensive building program and bond was presented to the voters which included more building at Montpelier, modernization of the Fielding High School plant, and an addition to the newer Georgetown school building which time has proved unnecessary. I joined the opposition, which this time was a majority, and the bond was defeated.

As time passed sentiment changed, and May 23, 1967, twenty years after my appointment as County Superintendent, the decision was made to send the eighth grades to Paris and the three upper high school grades to Montpelier. Their names were changed to the Bear Lake High School and Bear Lake Junior High School. Most people seemed pleased. I know that Georgetown adults remember the basketball games of yesterday played in the local gym, but the entire county cheers for "OUR TEAM" and are proud of the scholastic rating of the schools.

At present, schools are held in only four communities: grades 1-4 in Geneva for Thomas Fork Valley; grades 1-7 in Georgetown (the third largest center and then community having the largest percent of population increased in the county for the past decade); an elementary school in Paris for youngsters living in the Bear Lake Stake; and an 18 room elementary school in Montpelier which houses three sections for grades 1-6. Montpelier 7th graders meet in the old Lincoln elementary school building.

One after another, the smaller communities have decided to join the larger units. My dream of a consolidated school district has been realized and a county unity achieved that old timbers thought impossible.