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FEATURED

Local history group celebrates rural schools

By Tanya Starinets, News@pinecitymn.com Apr 27, 2017



Tanya Starinets | The Pioneer

The first school in Pine County was established in 1869.

On April 23, the Pine City Area History Association (PCAHA) held a meeting titled “Remembering Rural Schools.” More than 50 people were in attendance, and a large number of them had attended rural schools themselves. This common heritage brought them together on this sunny Sunday afternoon to the Pine City Public Library to reminisce, to learn, and to savor shared moments of recognition with friends, neighbors and compatriots. The meeting started the same way that the morning would start at the schools: with the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of the Star-Spangled Banner.

The first school in Pine County was in the Chengwatana Village. It was established in 1869, and stood where the Pine Government Center is located. In 1894, the district was reorganized and the school was moved three miles to the Hustletown area. It was known as Chengwatana or Wanous School. The land was donated by Henry Kruse. It served the community for 25 years. The first teacher in Hustletown District Number 69 was Miss Agnes Glanville. District number 69 was organized in 1905. The building has been moved to Pine City on Aug. 4, 1971, and restored as a

Rural School Museum.

In 1893 the Webster School was built on the present elementary school site. It housed the first high school in Pine County. By 1903 it was overcrowded, and two wings had to be added. In 1914 the first purpose built high school in the county was built in Pine City.

At one time Pine County consisted of 125 districts, with individual rural schools. The reorganization act of 1947 set up procedures for consolidating districts within a county. At that time there were 7,601 districts. The mandatory dissolution act of 1967 forced districts without a high school to consolidate with a district that did have a high school. "That spelled the end of many of the little one-room schools," said Judy Scholin, president of the PCAHA. Many of the school buildings were then turned into houses.

Pine City's Rural School Museum is one of the few operating rural schools in the state. It opens its doors to children every June for one-week sessions. Students are transported back in time. Boys dress in bib overalls, and girls wear bonnets, shawls and long dresses. They bring their jelly-sandwich lunches in pails. Children sit at old wooden desks, read textbooks dating back to 1890s, memorize poems, learn embroidery and quilting, and have special guests for talks and demonstrations. During recess they play Annie Over, Hide-and-Seek, Pum-Pum-Pullaway, and Red Rover. Many children return year after year. The schoolhouse was built in 1908 and restored in 1972. It served District 69, and was named the Wanous School. It was originally located east of Pine City and Cross Lake. In 1971 the school was moved into town. The museum is open to the public for tours on Sundays from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Many of the people in attendance shared their personal memories. One gentleman remembered having to sneak across the field to get to school, making sure that the bull was in the opposite corner. Originally, many of the schools were named after whose farm the school building was located on.

Another audience member remembered that the older children looked after the younger ones. "There was never an issue of bullying, like we keep hearing about now," she said. "We had no supervision at recess. And a neighborhood dog came and waited for the kids to get done, and we shared our lunch with her. Wish we could go back to those days." Many audience members nodded at the sentiment. Another member of the audience chimed in that her brother was paid \$5 per month to go early to the school to get the fire going to warm up the school. "He used kerosene and a match and was in the sixth grade," she said. The audience gasped and laughed.

Erna Pangerl attended the rural school for eight years. "Wages for teachers were \$125 per year," she

said as she addressed the audience. "And it cost \$2.50 per cord of wood to be delivered to the school." In 1907 the first school burned down. It was insured for \$450. It cost \$800 to rebuild the school, and \$15 for an acre of land for the new building. Many of the teachers had to come early to warm up the room by the time students arrived. She explained that attendance was poor, because young kids stayed home during very cold winters, and older kids had to work on the family farms in the fall. The Christmas program consisted of songs, plays, and Santa bringing peanuts, hard candy and an orange or an apple.

Tammi Kraft spoke next. "I was a city kid, but I married a local farmer 40 years ago and moved here," she said. Kraft worked as a teacher at the Rural School Museum for 15 years. She had the kids march to marching music, and pretend to be stomping out rats, because that was a big problem back in the day. Every morning they also put their lunches on the old furnace, as if to keep the food warm. Children would bring antiques from their grandparents and tell stories about their history. "All of my kids attended this school, too," Kraft said. "We had some kids come all the way from first through eighth grade."

Richard Lindig told of going to an auction to acquire the 350-pound bell. It was the last bell that ever rang at Milburn School, which was the last to consolidate. The bell was rebuilt and now sits on the roof of the Rural School Museum.

Each school district had their own board of directors. And the county superintendent went around to every school at least one a year. Each district made their own rules. Some did not allow married, or even engaged, women to be teachers. Others were more lenient.

Candice Anderson Ames, who worked for 43 years at the Pine City Schools, spoke about the rural schools' teachers. There were very strict rules for teachers. They couldn't be seen in unsavory places such as the local bar, and they had to be in bed at a certain time, and the board decided where they would live. "And they had to dry their panties in pillowcases," Ames said. Her father, Larry Anderson, lived with his parents at the family farm in the Pokegama area until he was 36 years old. He loved them dearly. He only recalls ever having had one argument with them. And it occurred when his younger sister, Mildred, got a job as a rural school teacher. His parents made him take out his car from their one-car garage, because it was now only to be used by Mildred, since she had such an important position now. "That is how proud they were of their daughter becoming a rural school teacher," said Ames. Mildred was hired in 1931 during the depth of the Great Depression. She worked in School District Number 99, and her pay was \$70 per month. "Some of the school districts could not afford to actually pay their teachers," Ames said, "so they gave them IOUs. People in the community who could afford to do so would cash them at 80 percent, and then hold onto the IOUs until such time as the school districts could actually pay."

A gentleman by the name of Rob recalled an episode from his own rural school days. He attended the District 99, Spring Valley school in Shuey. His teacher Esther was engaged to a man. But she fell in love with Leo Gardner, at the home she was staying in. Her fiancé came to the school one day with a pistol, “walked into the open school, said nothing, and sat in the back, waiting for 10 minutes for class to be over,” Rob said. The fiancé wanted his engagement ring back. Rob and his sister ran to the Gardners’ after school, to tell them what was going on, and Leo rushed to the school to his beloved. Leo and Esther ended up getting married safely.

Ed Stoffel is on both the PCAHA and on the Rural School Committee. “I’m a liaison between them,” he chuckled. He explained that rural schools were the community centers. With the consolidation, the city schools eliminated the local school boards, all of the schools’ assets, and a piece of the community and history. “Rural schools sprung up as neighborhoods were settled,” he said, “oftentimes just starting in somebody’s home, without a school building.”

Following the meeting, attendees chatted and ate cake, as they looked through old memorabilia of photos, school books, and other mementos. The Rural School Museum was opened just for the occasion. At the museum people reminisced about pumping water, going to the outhouses, the rare 13 star flag hanging on the wall. There is rich history of the schools and the county. Rural schools may be a thing of the past, but in the minds and hearts of the people who attended them, they are alive, heartwarming and vivid. The PCAHA has many other fascinating and educational programs and meetings in store.