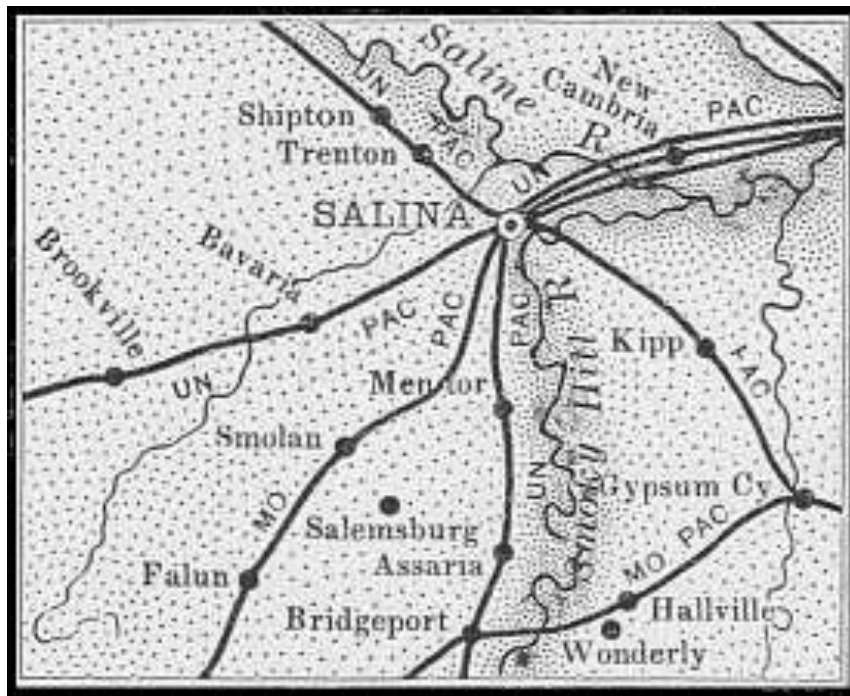


## A Crushing Blow: The Closing of Gypsum Rural High School, Gypsum, Kansas 1966-1967



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This paper is a study of the closure of Gypsum Rural High school in Gypsum, Saline County, Kansas, and how its closure affected the community surrounding and supporting it. The study includes census data, historical newspaper articles, and web articles as well as a photograph of the school.

## Introduction

Imagine yourself in a small, rural, Kansas town in the 1950s. If you're picturing what I'm picturing, you probably see a quiet neighborhood of white houses with wrap around porches shaded by large oak and maple trees. Main Street runs through the middle of town with all of the necessities of small town life. There's a bank, a post office, and a local grocery store with a few "mom and pop" shops in between. It's a picture perfect postcard of small-town USA. And in the middle of town sits a large brick building. It towers above the small houses that surround it. A chimney pokes out of the roof of the structure, which may be two or three stories. An arched doorway may have an inscription above it, and a date. This building is the anchor of the community: the past, the present, and the future. The building I am describing is the local high school.



**Figure 1: This is Hope High School, Hope, Kansas. This exemplifies a common style of architecture found of Kansas schools built in the 30s and 40s. It also serves as a perfect example of the quintessential rural high school the author describes. Source: photo taken by Craig Kohman**

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a school as, “An institution for educating children.” However, in rural Kansas in the 1950s, a high school was not *just* an educational institution -- it was a large part of the town’s identity. Inside the hallways of rural high schools hang rows and rows of photographs of past graduating classes. Residents could find their grandparents and in some cases, even great-grandparents, looking serious and hopeful at age 18. Town history was woven into the school. The town also supported the school by paying property taxes to fund operation. In return, the school provided an education for generations of children, a meeting place for the community, a venue for athletic and arts events, and a source of pride for the entire population. During the fall, the town was deserted every Friday night to support the high school’s varsity football team, and Saturday morning, men congregated in the local coffee shop or grocery store to talk about the previous night’s action. In the winter the basketball season was the talk of the town as victories and defeats were reported in the weekly newspaper. So important was this school life to communities that residents who had moved away would return for important games. In 1958, for instance, a Clay County newspaper reported, “Gary Arnett of Lawrence and Noel Martin of Lincoln, Nebraska arrived home Friday in time for the Clay Center-Abilene football game.”<sup>1</sup> The high school reciprocated this enthusiastic support by providing instruction and guidance to the youth of the community. Outstanding students and student athletes, musicians, actors, members of rural debate teams, budding writers and future politicians, young civic leaders and committed future teachers -- as well as their families -- received

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<sup>1</sup> Broughton Items, *Clay Center Times*, October 6, 1958.

recognition. The high school and the community supported each other.

Today I would like to write about the effects of school district consolidation in the 1960s in Kansas. I hope to convey the effects that consolidation had on rural towns in Kansas, more specifically, the town of Gypsum in southeastern Saline County. This paper will explain how the loss of a high school is absolutely devastating to the community it has supported.

### **The History of Kansas School Consolidation**

The first instances of consolidation of school districts in Kansas actually occurred in the early 1900s. After Kansas statehood in 1861, one-room schoolhouses popped up in all areas of developing Kansas, providing instruction to children from a two or three mile radius of farms. By the year 1900, over 9,000 separate school districts were in operation across the state.<sup>2</sup> One-room schoolhouses provided an opportunity for anyone between the ages of five and 21 years, regardless of race, to receive an education. Students would walk in over rough terrain up to two and a half miles to reach the small building and would spend the entire day learning from a local teacher. "I wore galoshes, but the snow could be so deep it often was impossible to complete my three quarters mile walk to Elm Slough School [Pottawatomie County]," recalls Dolores Weinman Lambrecht of her schooling in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Students also rode ponies and horses or were driven by their family members in wagons and later, automobiles.

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<sup>2</sup> See Legislative Post Audit Committee, State of Kansas, "Exploring Options for Consolidating Kansas School Districts." Last modified August 1992. Accessed May 12, 2012. <http://www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=C/UeW+PVkHg=&tabid=1916>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Dolores Weinman Lambrecht by Dr. M.J. Morgan and Erin Strathe,, July 15, 2012, Pottawatomie County, Kansas.

Unfortunately, in many cases the teachers of one-room schoolhouses were ill prepared to educate their students. A 1922 study conducted by the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, revealed that of all one-room schoolhouse teachers surveyed, less than 10% had been teaching for more than a year.<sup>4</sup> Early consolidation of small rural schools into larger “school districts” increased the efficiency and lowered the cost of teaching large numbers of students. Districts could provide better central facilities that could separate students by grade level and subject area. Although the concept of school consolidation eventually led to the death of the one room schoolhouse, it gave rise to a new model of efficiency, the consolidated school district. By the early 1930s, the consolidation of smaller school districts into larger central school districts was beginning to take effect. Intertwined social and economic factors contributed to this movement. As technology on farms improved, less people were needed to work in rural areas; the rural workforce declined. Between 1933 and 1970, thousands of people left rural Kansas counties to live in metropolitan areas.<sup>5</sup> This decrease in population forced school districts to merge to cut building and capital related expenses. The last year that Elm Slough School operated, for instance, likely 1942, there were only two students attending.<sup>6</sup>

The strongest wave of school district consolidation occurred in the early 1960s. In 1963 the Kansas Legislature passed a law that required schools to consolidate if they

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<sup>4</sup> Biennial Reports of the Kansas Board of Agriculture,” (1925)

<sup>5</sup> Lecture notes, Dr. M.J. Morgan, Lost Kansas Communities class, April, 2012. Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

<sup>6</sup> Dolores Weinman Lambrecht interview.

could not meet certain quotas. The law stated that to stay *unconsolidated*, schools had to meet two major requirements: an enrollment of 400 students in 12 grades and a supporting hinterland of at least 200 square miles with an assessed valuation of at least \$2 million. Many rural schools, especially those located in central and western Kansas, could not meet these requirements and were forced to close. Soon school boards began to require students to attend the largest schools in the county.<sup>7</sup> What was the effect of this?

The loss of a community educational facility severely diminished the population of many Kansas towns since 1930. In fact, in the last decade alone, over 70 counties out of 105 in Kansas have lost some percentage of their total population.<sup>8</sup> When towns lost their schools, many residents would move to the town where the new consolidated school was to be located, often the county seat. Others decided it was best to leave their small towns for even larger cities such as Wichita, Topeka, or Kansas City. Despite the fact that their great-grandparents may have homesteaded in the area or on the very land they still lived on, rural Kansas people knew their children had to be educated. They moved.

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<sup>7</sup> Legislative Post Audit Committee, State of Kansas, "Exploring Options for Consolidating Kansas School Districts."

<sup>8</sup> Amy Bickel. "Population Drain Dazes Rural Areas." *The Hutchinson News*, April 1, 2011. [www.hutchnews.com/print/SUN-Bickel-Census-story---HOLD--1](http://www.hutchnews.com/print/SUN-Bickel-Census-story---HOLD--1) (accessed May 12, 2012).

## Gypsum, Kansas and Gypsum Rural High School

Gypsum, Kansas, is a small town located in southeastern Saline County. The town was once a thriving community located along the Missouri Pacific Railroad, but now it is an empty reminder of what once was.



Figure 2: Street scene of Gypsum , Kansas circa 1910s. Source: Wichita State University, Special Collections. <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/images/PICS.HTML>

Today, most of the businesses along Main Street are closed and boarded up, and the only visible sign of the railroad's prior existence is a large steel bridge across a small creek (Gypsum Creek, for which the town was named.)

In the center of the community stands Gypsum Rural High School, a massive reminder of what once was. (Portrayed in Figure 2) The classrooms and the gymnasium of the high school both stand two stories high, with a tall brick chimney silhouetted

against the sky. Most of the windows of the building are broken and the entire structure is horribly vandalized on the inside. The roof of the main hallway is completely caved in and small animals live under scattered debris within the building.<sup>9</sup> It is quite a depressing sight as this building used to be the community's lifeblood.



**Figure 3. Gypsum Rural High School.**  
A photo of what was once Gypsum's primary high school. Photo by author, May, 2012.

By May of 1967, school districts were consolidating like wildfire all over the state of Kansas to save money and increase efficiency. Gypsum was no exception to this as residents, pushed by their school board, were considering joining their school district with two other towns, Mentor and Assaria, to form a unified school district. Gypsum had already been a part of the consolidation process when the small town of Kipp closed its school and moved its children to Gypsum. Many of the people in the town understood consolidation but weren't convinced the idea was a good one. If Assaria and Gypsum were to consolidate, the district high school would be in Assaria, while Gypsum Rural High School would become a junior high. Even though the enrollment of the school was well below the quota of 400 for a district, the people of the town knew the economic problems that would arise if the school were lost.

In the May 4, 1967 addition of the *Gypsum Advocate*, the school board announced plans to take a straw poll vote to gauge interest on the issue. Even though the school

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<sup>9</sup> Author field notes, May, 2012.



board planned to move forward with consolidating the schools, members wanted to determine how the community felt about the situation. By the next week, the people of Gypsum responded with strong opposition to the idea by creating a petition to keep the school operating at its current status.<sup>10</sup> Gypsum's population continued to fight for the survival of the local high school the entire summer, even though their efforts were in vain. The school board repeatedly struck down the idea of operating two separate high schools. Despite the population's efforts, the neighboring community of Assaria was awarded the district's high school. In Gypsum there was a sense of great loss and despair as well as anger towards the school board. People of Gypsum felt that a powerful minority had overruled their majority. The *Advocate* conveyed their displeasure with the situation and warning to other communities in the August 10<sup>th</sup> edition:

“Centralization of power will continue at a rapid pace unless local citizens express themselves to their law makers. It is difficult for local people to fight organized lobbies with abundant finance. It must be done at the grass roots or the small community level, or Gypsum is doomed to oblivion.”<sup>11</sup>

After the closure of the school, as residents had feared, the population in the town sharply declined. In 1960 the population of Gypsum was 593 people. In 1970, a mere ten years later, the city had lost 202 people, 34% of its total population. The amount of new housing built in Gypsum also declined. From 1940 to 1960, 38 new homes were built in

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<sup>10</sup> “Circulate Petitions To Prevent Closing Gypsum High School,” *The Gypsum Advocate*, May 3, 1967.

<sup>11</sup> *The Gypsum Advocate*, August 10, 1967.

the city as it continued to modestly persevere. However, from 1960 to 2010 only 26 new homes were built, and none of the 26 was built after 2000.<sup>12</sup>

In 1973 a new high school known as Southeast Saline High School was constructed in a location geographically central to the towns of Gypsum, Kipp, and Assaria. The school's actual address is a rural route in Gypsum, but it is really 15 miles west of old Gypsum. The construction of the high school has benefitted the area by stimulating the growth of small housing developments nearby. The high schools in Assaria and Kipp were eventually both bought out by Great Plains international, a farm equipment manufacturing company, and converted into warehouses. Great Plains International now operates manufacturing centers in Kipp and Assaria but not in Gypsum.<sup>13</sup> Only Gypsum's high school still stands.

### **Conclusion**

Though consolidation of schools is beneficial in many ways to the education of Kansans, it more than often means the death of entire towns. Rural communities and local governments must learn to find a balance between education and economic structure, because without cooperation, excellence in each and mutual continued growth is not possible. Schools hold communities together, but residents and communities pay for schools: it's a fact of life. Without its heart, a community cannot survive.

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<sup>12</sup> "Gypsum, Kansas Houses and Residents" www. City-Data.com, (2012). Last accessed May, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> See "Great Plains – a history of success" at <http://www.greatplainsint.com/about-great-plains.php>. Last accessed July, 2012.



Figure 4: The train depot at Gypsum, Kansas. The Missouri Pacific Railroad was the driving force of Gypsums growth in the towns earliest years. Source: Wichita State University, Special Collections. <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/images/PICS.HTML>

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