

FIRST CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL LAW IN THE UNITED STATES

By Frank D. Northrup*

On one of our cross country trips we pulled up behind a loaded school bus slowly climbing a long hill. Impatient to reach our night's destination I used some words that might have been interpreted as wishing such vehicles off the road.

"You should object to school buses," the lady mildly remarked. "It cost you plenty to put them where they are."

That merited rebuke took my mind back a long, long way—more than forty years in fact. It was in the June first issue of the *Oklahoma Farm Journal* published in Oklahoma City by the late John Fields¹ and myself that we introduced the idea of consolidated

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¹ John Fields (1871-1935), Oklahoma editor and a Republican political leader, was born in Iowa and reared in Pennsylvania. He graduated from Pennsylvania State College in 1891, and became a technical expert in chemistry. He served as Assistant Chemist in Pennsylvania State College and Experiment Station in 1891-1894, and as a technical expert in New York in 1895. He became Assistant Chemist at Oklahoma A. and M. College in 1896, was promoted to Chemist in 1898, and was Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station and Agent for the College from 1899-1906, at Stillwater. He was editor and co-owner of the *Oklahoma Farm Journal* and *Southwest Farmer-Stockman* from 1906 to 1915, and editor of the *Oklahoma Farmer* until 1924. He was the Republican nominee and made the campaign for Governor of Oklahoma in 1914 and in 1922. During World War I, he served as an assistant to the National Food Control Administration, in charge of publicity and superintendence of grain production. He was Vice-President and a director of the Farmers' National Bank of Oklahoma City, 1924-1926, and was made Vice-President and director of the Federal Land Bank and the Federal Intermediate Credit Bank at Wichita, Kansas in 1926. He was an experienced, well-known lecturer on agricultural topics before farmers' and bankers' conventions. He wrote numerous bulletins on agricultural chemistry and allied subjects, published by the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, and was author of the volume *Sure Food Crops*.—Ed.



**JOHN FIELDS, Editor, *Oklahoma Farm Journal*
Office in Oklahoma City, 1911.**

country schools for Oklahoma and started a campaign that was to last for more than five years. The problem that initiated the idea should be of some historical interest. As is true in probably all movements toward progress, self-interest touched it off. The *Farm Journal* was rapidly making a place for itself on the new farms of the then Oklahoma Territory, its circulation extending to all sections of it. Business was going ahead in a satisfactory manner, including the circulation which was growing at a pleasing rate. But there was a "fly in the ointment."

In many of the farm homes were children who had completed such schooling as the little districts, with their inadequate equipment and, often, inferior teachers, could give them and it was from the parents of these children that letters came, sometimes a few, often many, each day, requesting a change in their address because, they regretfully said, it was necessary to move to town, or to some one of the school centers in the state, to educate the children. Most of these letters were pitiful, others courageous in that these parents who had fought the sun and the winds, the tough sod and the blackjacks, to make a home for themselves were now to tackle another type of pioneering—making a living the best they could in town and, nine cases in ten, living in a small house. They protested bitterly but what else was there for them to do? The children could not be allowed to grow up in ignorance. Comparatively few of such families had progressed far enough financially to provide for their children in town while they remained on the land.

The situation was disturbing and, I recall, more than mildly distressing. When a farm owner moved, a farmer-stockman moved; a community builder, soil improver and major local taxpayer moved. A cash cropper, without financial interest in the soil, the farm buildings and fences, moved in. The community and the state lost. The *Farm Journal* lost a valued subscriber and its advertising patrons a potential customer. All this was a subject for frequent discussions and Fields and I desperately sought methods to overcome it. Then in the June 1, 1906, issue of the semi-monthly *Farm Journal* appeared the first of literally hundreds of editorial appeals for "country schools that will provide the same advantages for country children that the cities and towns have." Little did we know the magnitude, or should I say, difficulties, of the job we started. Could we have foreseen the five and one-half years just ahead, and the personal and financial gestures necessary to bring to a successful conclusion I still believe we would have had the courage to take the campaign on. The "little red school house" was regarded as a sacred tradition and, even in a new country where it was little more than a temporary open-seamed shack or a hole in a creek bank, and comparably furnished. The time-honored sentiment to cling to it was hard to shake off. Any program for a change would be fighting a proud and noble ancestry of a

great school system. The going was tough, criticism equally tough. It was a contest of endurance every progressive step of the way and we learned early that even many well-informed persons hesitate to embrace a new idea. When that idea touched education the battle, I think, is understandable.

But farm mothers, women who had endured the hell on earth through the years of keeping house in covered wagons, tents, dug-outs and leaky, crudely boarded shacks, braved the winds and dust, the heat and cold, to a modicum of comfort and security, were made of sterner stuff. These new homes, so dearly won, were theirs and they had no desire to leave them for uncertain living in towns. If their could get adequate schooling for the kids at home to heck with the so-called sacredness of the little red school house, or those with no color at all, which was the case in a majority of them. Their letters which came by the hundreds gave us the courage to take up the battle in earnest. They also supplied the front line base for the final showdown. This militant group received at intervals instructions that were not printed in the *Farm Journal*. Men, fewer in numbers, but with influence in their communities were kept in touch with.

The June, 1906, proposal for consolidated schools was followed up intermittently that year, creating little sentiment. At least the reaction was not as favorable as we had hoped. Not discouraged, the January 1, 1907, number of the *Journal* came out for "A State School System," the first paragraph urging consolidated country schools. The article was timely in that the State Constitutional Convention was in session and groping for what it hoped would prove to be an adequate school system, and we were hopeful that the suggestions would help. I still think they and others that followed did. Anyway, our reference to consolidation was not given much verbal thought. But progress was being made and before the end of the year there were consolidations in several communities—one in each of the following counties: Grant, Pawnee, Payne, Kiowa and Custer. Each of these communities had been visited by Fields whose talks had much to do building the needed sentiment. The children were transported by wagons; poor roads made trouble and the gas-powered bus was not yet a public utility. There was no specific State law for these schools. Their patrons built them and, events proved, they were pleased with the reformation.

Country parents were still writing those distressing letters and moving to town. Tenantry was growing. Increasing numbers of readers made it imperative that our campaign never cease, the newer ones needed the information. An occasional old subscriber would write us to give the folks a "rest on the school business," and it had to be explained to him that there could be no rest and

would not be long as new readers were added to the subscription list. Nobody could have been more weary with it than we but there was but one place to stop. How long it would take to reach it we didn't know. Then one morning early in 1908 a prominent farmer and cattle man considerable distance from his trading town, dropped in. He was bitter about the school problem. "My children have got to have more education and I can't afford to break up my start in a good business and move to town," he told us. "I can't afford two households. What I am going to do?"

It developed that he had tried to effect a consolidation of several small districts in order to include higher grades but had failed for lack of co-operation. Here was a prospering young farmer with a promising future (time proved him all of that) who saw that future disrupted because of inadequate country schools. There was nothing we could do at the moment but he did add to our determination to put an extra punch in our school plan. Within two hours after he left we clarified the proposal, making it definite, a principle which was adhered to until the finish. Here is the proposition that appeared in the following issue of the *Farm Journal*:

Whenever a school district comprising an area of not less than twenty-five square miles shall have been established within the state and a building containing not fewer than three rooms suitable for school purposes shall have been built and a graded school employing not fewer than three teachers shall have been conducted for one term of not less than six months, there shall be paid by the state to such school district, upon properly certified application of the board of directors, an amount of money not exceeding one-half the cost of such school building; Provided, that not more than \$2,500 shall be paid by the state to any one such school district. To provide the necessary funds, state school bonds bearing five per cent interest shall be issued as required and such bonds shall be purchased at par by the board of school land commissioners and paid out of the \$5,000,000 permanent school fund, the interest on such bonds to be paid out of funds arising from general taxation of all property within the state.

Using the proposed appropriation of \$2,500 from the school fund as bait we put on all the pressure possible in 1908. Fields was making a minimum of 150 speeches annually, fully three-fourths of them before rural groups, and omitted no opportunity to get in a plug for the school plan. Sentiment in the country was building up fast, a fact that comparatively few town and city folks knew. It is a curious fact that none of the larger city newspapers, and but few country weeklies, noticed it and only such politicians as lived in the rural districts recognized it as a force to some day be reckoned with. Leaders in both of the major parties passed it up with a shrug, if indeed, they gave it a serious thought. This fact will be noted in the letter of Dr. A. C. Scott in this article in which he states that "little note of it has been taken," yet he, as an educator kept in closer touch with educational trends than most. Yet by now an average of more than 1,000 copies per county

of the *Farm Journal* were going, by paid-in-advance invitation into farm homes.

It was the fact that the proposal failed to penetrate political minds that provoked the decision to take the question into politics. The only way to do this, we decided, was for Fields to declare himself a candidate for Governor and make it his leading issue. He was a Republican by belief and inheritance. Knowing that the state was almost certain to be Democratic, and being totally unknown in party politics, he tried to make himself think he could be a Democrat. He just couldn't do it and came out as a Republican. It was a hopeless gesture, so far as the nomination was concerned. On that score we did not deceive ourselves. But the purpose was accomplished. Running third in a field with such well-known men as Governor T. B. Ferguson, Joseph W. McNeal, and C. G. Jones, was a showing of strength sufficient to force each major party to include the consolidated country school proposal in their platforms. Both planks were written by Fields, for the Democratic platform, through a friend. But platforms being platforms, leaders of both parties did not take this one too seriously at the time, but pressure from the country proved such that the legislature elected in 1910 passed the measure.

In the meantime, through the years 1908, 1909, 1910, the proposal was influenced for the better by certain leading educators, heads of the state institutions of higher learning and, also, of leaders in the schools of the larger cities. A notable instance is that of Dr. Chas. Evans, now Secretary of the State Historical Society, then head of the Ardmore schools, who in 1908 brought Mr. O. J. Kern, an Illinois school man, into Oklahoma where he spoke to the Oklahoma Educational Association, injecting needed enthusiasm into teachers of the state. Illinois was making a limited experiment in consolidated schools, as was one district in Indiana, both of which we were watching closely. But the teachers, then even more than now, had no means of spreading propaganda, however good, to the people as a whole and whatever efforts they made was sporadic and, eventually died of inactivity.

In putting the school proposal into politics, an editorial in the December 15, 1909, issue ended with the following paragraph:

If this is politics, then the *Oklahoma Farm Journal* is in politics, and in it to the full limit of its resources, until those who run the state, whether Democrats, Republicans, or Socialists, show at least a few symptoms of giving thought to assisting country people develop and build schools in which all the children of the state may obtain an elementary education, and in which the teaching of agriculture may be something more than a time-consuming bluff.

This is what in today's street vernacular would be called "sticking our necks out." The challenge had its intended effect. The

proposal was in the lap of the Legislature. A mere handful of legislators, all from the country, gave this problem practically all their time and energy, and supported by letters inspired by the *Farm Journal*, and Fields and me individually, succeeded in getting the measure to the Governor—the measure written by Fields. Naturally, there were the usual amendments that self-important members felt called on to make, though not too much change was made. Somewhere along the way from the Governor to the statute book errors in transcriptions were made to render the measure invalid—no money could be appropriated. We had our own opinion as to what happened but no proof. So disgusted, mad, and all but completely disheartened with the loss of more than three years of diligent effort, our belts were given an additional hitch and the fight went on.

In the meantime came the following letter from the late Dr. A. C. Scott, former President of the A. & M. College and one of the State's foremost educators and citizens:

EDITOR OKLAHOMA FARM JOURNAL:

And so the bill in aid of consolidated schools was finally passed, in the closing hours of the legislative session! Little note of it has been taken but in my opinion it is the best, the most important, and the most far-reaching measure in the interest of education that this legislature or any other of our legislatures have enacted into law; and in connection with the provision for a state board of education it will undoubtedly mark an epoch in the educational history of Oklahoma. To be sure, not quite the amount of money desired is pledged to the purpose; but the provision is ample for everything that can be done with it within the next two years, and by that time, I predict that public opinion will be so overwhelmingly committed to the plan that no legislator will stand against it.

For the whole question is this: Why should not the sons and daughters of the farm have the same advantages of education, at their own homes, that the sons and daughters of the town have? The answer is: They should. And the only way to bring this about is such a consolidation of forces by small districts as shall make possible the grading of the schools and the addition, as circumstances justify, of grades above the common school work, until the educational opportunities of the country are equivalent to those of the town.

But, Mr. Editor, one of my chief purposes in writing this letter is to say that this great measure is the victory of the *Oklahoma Farm Journal*. It is true, thousands of farmers have contributed to, and in a measure forced, the result. But the *Oklahoma Farm Journal* started the storm, furnished the thunder, and greased the lightning! Almost single handed and alone it created the sentiment which was powerful enough to override all obstacles and secure the enactment of this most beneficent law; and it and its editor most richly deserve the congratulations and thanks of the farmers and, for that matter, of all the people of the state.—A. C. Scott, Oklahoma City, March 22, 1911.

Then came two years more of the same work to which was added a determination to take the proposal to the people. To that end men were employed to circulate petitions. Names in sufficient

numbers were gained but never used, since the end was reached without. For this work Fields and I paid more than \$10,000, a lot of money in 1911. Anyhow the half of which was mine seemed a lot.

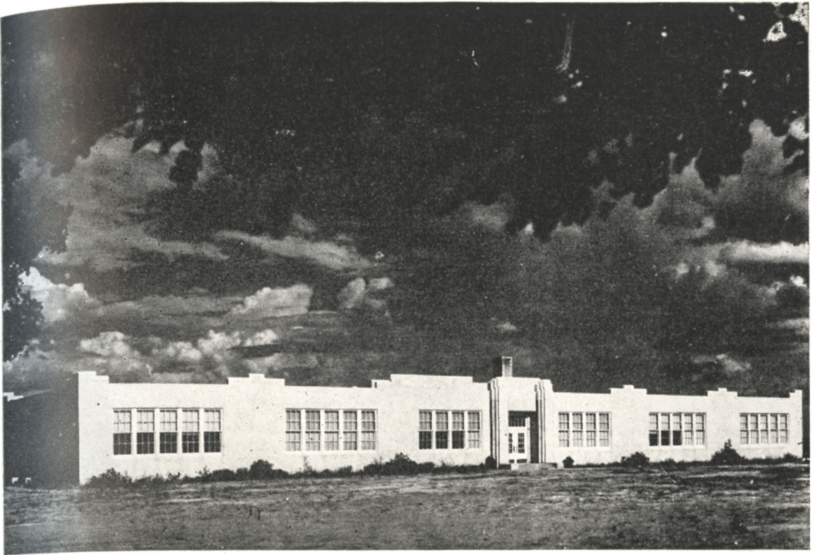
Now there was help that counted. More of the politically minded, progressive citizens, had given the matter thought, and liked what they learned. They were a force which made our works more pleasant. Teacher groups, too, more openly supported the proposal. Elected to the 1912-13 Legislature were a number of its strong supporters: Senators Curren of Kay County, Tucker of Carter County, and Representatives Lemon of Grant County, Woodward of Kiowa, Pruitt of Caddo and Harry Cordell of Washita, each a power. Again the bill was prepared in our office, which was a rallying point. When the bill came to a vote in the closing hours of the Legislature a front page editorial, nicely timed, and in 12-point type instructed our country folks just what to do. They did it and members of each house told me later that on a single day more than 10,000 letters were delivered to them in the Wright building, corner and Second and Broadway, Oklahoma City, where they met. Final vote was pleasing to John Fields and me and worth the fight of more than five years. It was: Senate, 30 to 11; House, 65 to 16. Governor Cruce signed the bill in March 1913.

The courageous farm mothers and fathers—mothers come first here and were the most potent fighters—now had the money and the law for their schools. The system was immediately put into operation, the new State led the United States in what is now a universal country school system and which, by the way, uses that slow bus which annoyed me on the road.

As an indication that victory did not cause us to lose our sense of perspective, the following editorial was published in our April 1, 1913, number, *Oklahoma Farm Journal*:

UP TO YOU NOW

The problem of improved rural schools has been solved by the passage of House Bill 149. This merely means that the state has recognized the principle that the elementary schools of the state need improvement—that the system needs to be changed to fit modern conditions—that state funds should be spent for improving the people's schools as well as for buildings and maintaining colleges. But the people of each community must for themselves determine what they will do, if anything. There are large areas in the state where the consolidation of schools is impracticable, because of physical conditions of the locality and the financial condition of the people. Something must in time be done by the state for these localities. But at least half of the state's area is of a sort which makes the consolidation of schools most desirable. And wherever these conditions exist and the people generally are willing that graded schools may be built and maintained, the good work should go forward. There is no use in attempting to force the building and development of better schools on unwilling people. But those who do not



Consolidated school building in Oklahoma



Typical school house built in districts after
Oklahoma became a state in 1907

want such schools themselves ought at least to prefer that other farmers have them and have help from the state in building them, rather than that the proceeds from the Public Building Lands should all be spent for purposes of but little benefit to country children. The *Journal* will continue doing all that it can in helping this good work along, by supplying all the information obtainable and telling of what others have done. But it will not attempt to force consolidation of schools on communities which don't want it. Resources amounting to about \$2,500,0000 have been safely set aside to help build such schools. A thousand communities will quickly see the opportunity and make use of it. Those which do not will be no worse off than heretofore, and no better. It's up to you, folks.

[Signed]: John Fields.