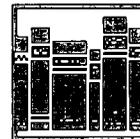


Book Review



There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa. D. R. Reynolds. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1999, 344 pp., ISBN: 0877456933.

Review by

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There Goes the Neighborhood is a well-researched addition to the body of existing literature dealing with rural educational history. Like Alan DeYoung's *The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell Little Kanawha*¹, the great strength of Reynolds' work is that it provides a historical "close-up" of how consolidation came to be sold to a rural community and the divisive debates that ensued. In *There Goes the Neighborhood*, Reynolds offers an engaging account of school consolidation in Delaware County, Iowa. This story, together with DeYoung's work in West Virginia, represents the best secondary sources available for historians who would like some leverage over "how it really happened" in the lives of rural people.

Part I of the book, however, leaves something to be desired. Reynolds call this part "Theoretical and Historical Contexts," but as far as theorizing is concerned, *There Goes the Neighborhood* promises more than it delivers. On the other hand, in terms of providing an account of grass-roots history, Part II delivers more than it promises. One difficulty with Part I is what seems like an attempt on the part of Reynolds to set his work apart from that of others. Reynolds' analysis is unlike that of others he maintains, because his work is "place and class-based." Other historians, he asserts, "undercontextualize." Defending this, or at least attempting to demonstrate it, unnecessarily forced Reynolds into some pretty tight corners.

For instance, while hoping to utilize class analysis in his account, he found it necessary to lump tenant farmers and farm owners together as if their interests and circum-

stances were one and the same. If he had not done this, his conclusions about farmers resisting consolidation in order to make their place what they wanted it to be would have been strikingly similar to those I advanced in *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918*.² But again, in what seems like an attempt to accomplish little more than differentiating his analysis from mine, Reynolds claims that tenancy "has never been a very good indicator of either income or class status of a family farm in the Midwest" and that "the in-and out-migration of families" did not vary between tenants and owner-operators (p. 33). These are huge claims and virtually unsupported. Further, they smack of the kind of scholarly "secondhandedness" that Alfred North Whitehead lamented.³ That is to say, one gets the distinct sense that the analysis is not informed by any first-hand knowledge. The book reads as if Reynolds has never sat in a farm parlor and heard the hushed references to "those people" who rent the quarter section east of the cemetery. And as far as persistence in a neighborhood is concerned, Reynolds' claim can only be defended in periods of severe agricultural depression, such as the 1920s and 30s, when there were few urban jobs to go to and when former farm owners were forced to sell to banks and insurance companies, becoming tenants themselves.

To make matters worse, Reynolds suggests that tenant farmers, particularly in the western cash-grain regions of the state, were simply a "new class" of businessmen buying into modernism and predisposed to accept the consolidation discourse of Progressive reformers. This "new form of tenancy" was a choice made, presumably in opposition to land ownership, as a smart business move and in keeping with emerging capitalist dispositions. This analysis might hold from, say, 1970 on, but it is almost completely out of step with early twentieth century notions about farming and the best way to do it. One rented a farm in those days only if there was absolutely no way to buy one.

¹Alan J. DeYoung, *The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell Little Kanawha* (New York: Garland, 1995).

²Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995).

³Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

This idea of a “new class of tenants” is advanced because Reynolds discovered that in some western counties with high levels of tenancy, consolidation was generally better accepted than elsewhere in the state. He never mentions the fact, however, that tenants did not have to pay the property tax to support construction of the new consolidated schools and that this may have played a large role in their thinking. And while one might argue that they would have paid for the increased taxes with increased rents, cash rent was not the typical tenancy arrangement. During the early twentieth century, share rent was more common.

This was a road Reynolds did not have to go down. Indeed, he contradicts much of what he contends regarding tenancy, at one point claiming that the interest of tenants and owners were one and the same, at another point claiming that Iowa during the early twentieth century witnessed “the emergence of a new subclass of tenants . . . fueling land speculation and squeezing out many would-be farmers” (p. 91). I offered the very same analysis in *Call School*. I also argued that whenever possible, farm owners worked to make sure that their sons were not “squeezed out.” Reynolds quotes my work on the subject: “Institutional manipulation at the local level was a *small part* of the process where a minority population came to own land and pass it on to their descendants” (emphasis added, p. 28). Reynolds infers, despite the fact that he used my very words to the contrary, that I looked at the local school as a *large part* of the process. While it is true that farm owners often needed tenants, they did not need the same tenants year after year. Indeed, it often worked to their advantage if tenants looked for new farms elsewhere after a few years in one place. This was particularly true if there were sons in the owner’s family that would eventually need a farm, or if the tenants were members of an “undesirable” religious or ethnic group.

Describing rural resistance to consolidation, Reynolds wrote: “Controlled as it usually was by the prominent families in a rural neighborhood, the country school could be depended upon to reproduce the social relations necessary for the perpetuation of a rural ideology and class structure in which the family farm and the rural neighborhood were the preeminent social units” (p. 57). This was essentially my conclusion in *Call School*. The degree to which farm tenancy was a factor to be controlled in a small way by the location chosen for the schoolhouse, the tuition charged for “outside scholars,” the arbitrary expulsion of a student, the decision not to provide free textbooks for all patrons—actually, any number of small ways—was merely a part of that controlling process. To assert that a Methodist dominated school board might wield these controls to discriminate against a Catholic family, as Reynolds does, but would not in some instances do the same for a tenant family, is a weak argument. Indeed, Reynolds’ own data

revealed that such a practice was at least probable. At one point he recounts that argument of a local farmer who opposed the boundaries drawn for a consolidated district. While the proposed district included the land of several farms this individual owned, the lines conveniently excluded the building sites on these farms, leaving the children of his tenants ineligible to attend the new consolidated school. Can we assume that this clever gerrymandering was a coincidence?

Once again, this was a road that Reynolds did not need to go down. Like other kinds of circumstances, tenancy was one of the contextual, place-based variables that mattered in some locations, but did not in others. As such, tenancy fit Reynolds’ larger framework and it should have been left at that.

Another theoretical problem in Part I has to do with what I take to be an inadequate account of what the Country Life movement of the early twentieth century was designed to accomplish. Reynolds slides into a presentation that leaves the reader feeling as if Country Lifers were primarily about equal educational opportunity and producing a widespread adaptation to emerging “modern” principles of production. Lost in this account is the extent to which Country Lifers sought to avoid “race suicide” through the mixing of cityward rural youth with the southern and eastern Europeans who were flocking into American cities by the hundreds of thousands at the time that the Country Life Commission was created. It was a movement born of Social Darwinism (that is to say, racism) and this explains why Country Lifers were trying, first and foremost, to keep rural kids in the countryside. This also explains why curricular reform (in the form of agricultural or nature studies) was the primary goal of many Country Lifers. It explains, too, why they did not push school consolidation very hard. The idea was to reinvigorate rural neighborhoods, not alienate them. It was the professional class of educators who were the real driving force behind school consolidation. They became convinced that small rural schools were simply inadequate from an educational standpoint. Interestingly, again, this comes out in the data Reynolds provides. In this case, a reporter for a very small newspaper prepared a story intended to marshal support for a second school consolidation vote. The first one failed. She wrote: “How long before the people in this community will wake up. It’s hard to tell, but seeing no race suicide in this community the time is coming when it will be positively impossible to house and educate the children in a dinky one-room school” (p. 172). In other words, if the arguments of the Country Lifers didn’t work, we might as well try the card advanced by the professional educators.

More careful attention to the motives of the Country Lifers would have fleshed out the context a bit more and problematized Reynolds’ depiction of rural school consolidation as a simple either/or dichotomy: “The choice

was between what was good for society—equality of educational opportunity for all individuals in the larger society—and what was good for community—a sense of collective identity and a set of shared values and a means of reproducing them” (p. 242). It is not at all clear that rural school consolidation as a piece of the solution to the “rural problem” was about equality or equal opportunity at all.

The long theoretical discussion of Part I, complete with some minor missteps by Reynolds, otherwise obscures a truly first-rate interdisciplinary account in Part II of how school consolidation shook out in a specific rural locale. While the claims of providing a class-based account remain vague and largely unfulfilled, Reynolds does provide an exceptional place-based account. Weaving the efforts of the rural church into the larger context of Delaware County, he achieves a well-rounded look at the circumstances of a place.

In the process, he answers many of the questions he posed in the introduction. Was rural school consolidation a natural response to declining rural population? No. What set of values were farmers fighting for when they fought school consolidation? They fought for the right to determine how their places would be. Was their fight an expression of allegiance to democratic principles? No. Was their fight an expression of a backward anti-intellectualism? No. It was, as Reynolds demonstrates, a fight to control the circumstances in their place and thereby the contours of their lives.

There is some powerful analysis here. Reynolds points out that Midwest farmers might have followed the lead of Danish farmers and built schools that were academically focused on the rural neighborhood. This did not happen, according to Reynolds, because they were overwhelmed by the “hegemony of reformist discourse” (p. 238). But Reynolds also contends that the hegemony of consolidation discourse is fading, a circumstance which suggests that creating communitarian rural schools stands a better chance in the twenty-first century than it did in the twenti-

eth. Certainly there is evidence of movement in that direction. Many states now have fledgling place-based educational initiatives striving for legitimacy. If more people interested in rural education would look into the kind of history Reynolds provides, that legitimacy might come quickly.

This is partially so because of the intriguing questions Reynolds asks. For example, in the preface Reynolds notes that the collapse of the Populist movement in America coincided with the moment that rural education ascended to a place on the national reform agenda. “Was the timing of these events purely coincidental? An underlying theme emerging from this inquiry into rural school consolidation is that they were not” (p. xi). This suggests that America’s leading Progressive era intellectuals were engineering a whole scale rejection of the kind of democratic arrangements that Tocqueville found so compelling about America. In theory and in practice, policy decisions were to be removed as far as possible from the hands of the people who would live with the results. Rural folk were no exception in this regard. Indeed, they were singled out for special attention, probably because of the threat they posed during the 1890s, a threat that, though a decade old, still sent shivers down the backs of America’s industrial moguls.

Could community-oriented rural schools rebuild and reinvigorate rural neighborhoods? Could a slow rebuilding of local institutions and associations reinsert Tocquevillian democratic practices and dismantle the hegemony of Progressive era ideas? Perhaps. One thing is certain, however. Without access to the kind of history Reynolds provides, it’s not likely to happen. Montesquieu, Tocqueville’s intellectual mentor, argued that republics will inevitably lose their vitality when they lose the “feel” of their own history. I think that this is no less true for rural neighborhoods. If rural revitalization is going to happen, rural Americans will have to acquire a feel for their history. *There Goes the Neighborhood* puts us a little closer to this goal.