

# The Rural County Superintendent of Schools of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: One Look

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## **Introduction**

Education has been a priority to the people of Kansas since settlement began there in the mid-nineteenth century. As people arrived in Kansas to live, schooling began for children in the home, dugout shelters, or some other structure as soon as people were in habitation long enough to permit it. As more settlers arrived and communities were formed, formal education began to be organized, and it became apparent that local governance of education and supervision of teachers were needed to ensure that education needs were being met. Governance and supervision in that era were the tasks of the county superintendent of schools. This paper examines the development of the position of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kansas county superintendent of schools and looks at the work of one county superintendent of schools in Lincoln County, Kansas.

## **Historical Background**

Before 1854, Kansas was inhabited primarily by Native American groups. Some of these groups were indigenous to the area; others were moved there to reservations that had been set aside by the United States government. However, this changed that year, as the first of two waves of settlers coming to Kansas began upon the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The Kansas-Nebraska Act formally established Kansas as a territory and allowed the people in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska to decide whether or not to allow slavery within their borders. The Act served to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820 which prohibited slavery north of latitude 36°30'. Many of these first settlers went to Kansas because of their pro-slavery or anti-slavery beliefs and they wanted play a part in which ideology Kansas would adopt ("The Kansas-Nebraska Act," n.d.).

As the population grew in Kansas, the citizens began to want an organized education system. The creation of the office of the county superintendent occurred in two steps. The first step came about with the Kansas Common School Act of 1858, passed by the Legislative Assembly of the Kansas Territory. By this time, the eastern one-third of what is now Kansas had county organization extending from its northern to southern borders. The Common School Act of 1858 provided for the organization and maintenance of common schools. The term "common schools" referred to a standardized education system in which all the teachers underwent similar preparation to teach, the curriculum was the same, grade levels were the same, and so forth. It also provided for a Kansas Territorial Superintendent of Schools, who would oversee education and make an annual report to the House of Representatives on the condition of education in the territory. The second step, the actual creation of the office of county superintendent of schools, subsequently came about as a result of an 1859 Law, also passed by the Legislative Assembly of the Kansas Territory (Samuelson, 2000, p. 30).

Kansas acquired statehood on January 29, 1861. Later that year the newly drafted Constitution of the State of Kansas included this language: "The Legislature shall encourage the promotion of intellectual, moral, scientific and agricultural improvements, by establishing a uniform system of common schools..." (Samuelson, 2000, p. 10).

Then the second of the two waves of settlers coming to Kansas occurred, a result of the Homestead Act of 1862. Signed into law by President Lincoln, it gave title from the United States to a settler who held 160 acres of surveyed government land for five years, and made improvements by building a 12 by 14 foot dwelling and growing crops. The act was amended in 1865 to allow a homesteader with Union military experience to deduct the length of the service from the five years required to obtain title (“Teaching with Documents: The Homestead Act of 1862,” n.d.).

### **The Kansas County Superintendent**

The county superintendent became the primary education power of that time. Education in the rural counties became what the county superintendent was determined to make it be. The quality of education in the county depended on the superintendent’s experience, commitment, knowledge or willingness to learn, philosophy, and sense of mission.

The early county superintendents were elected by voters in each county for a two-year term and came from a variety of backgrounds, such as business, ministry, the military, and education. The county superintendent had the following tasks:

1. Organize the district boundary
2. Identify and record the district boundary
3. Assist with revenue production for the district
4. Serve as repository of district funds
5. Serve as arbiter of disputes between districts
6. Supervise eighth grade examinations
7. Administer and grade teacher exams
8. Grant licenses to teachers
9. Assist with the hiring of teachers
10. Evaluate teachers
12. Inspect school buildings (Samuelson, 2000, p. 30)

Once the need for a school district was recognized, the superintendent oversaw the election of three citizens who would serve as a district board of education. The superintendent would identify the district boundaries and assign a district number in chronological order, based on creation date of the district, not on geographical location. At that time a school district consisted of a single school, which was held in basements or attics of businesses, in homes, in dugouts, and so forth until a school house could be built (Samuelson, 2000, p. 30). It was the obligation of the school board to see to it that the school house was built and provided for (Samuelson, 2000, p. 34).

### **Organization of Education in Lincoln County, Kansas**

Lincoln County, Kansas is in north central Kansas and started its education system in much the same way as did the other Kansas counties. The first county superintendent in Lincoln County was elected in 1870, the same year that the county was officially organized. The election occurred only five years after the first permanent structure was built in the county. Between 1865 and 1870, a number of settlers came to Lincoln County. Many of the settlers came as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, and many were veterans of the Civil War. However, between 1865 and 1870, Lincoln County was both a difficult and dangerous place to live. In addition to the hardships of survival, many Native American groups traveled through the county regularly following the waterways and sought to prevent the settlement of the county. Attacks on the settlers were frequent with much loss of life and property until four military blockhouses were built at different locations in Lincoln County in 1869 (Holman, 1979, p. 50). The last nomadic group of Native Americans was seen traveling through Lincoln County in 1880 (Barr, 1908, p. 42).

Even with the hardship and danger, the desire for organized education prompted the first three school districts to be organized in 1870. Most early superintendents took their work seriously regardless of their background and knowledge of education. In her book *A Souvenir History of Lincoln County* (1908), Elizabeth Barr had this to say about the first ten of eleven Lincoln County superintendents:

The leading characteristic of each superintendent might be summed up in a single word: Washington, oldest; Wright, handsomest; Harmon, finest presence; Biggs,

busiest; Harris, strictest; Allsworth, laziest; Trueman, jolliest; E.D. Smith, most dignified; Lyon, most scholarly; and Stanley, most forceful.” (p. 98)

Barr does not mention John Lyden, Lincoln County’s first county superintendent, however, because he was murdered in 1875 before she arrived in Lincoln County (Barr, 1908, p. 49). She does identify Superintendent Biggs as the busiest, which is an accurate statement. Alexander Thaddeus Biggs was the fourth county superintendent of schools and the focus of the remainder of this paper.

**Alexander Thaddeus Biggs: Early Lincoln County Superintendent of schools**

Biggs was a school teacher and cobbler in Ohio when the Civil War started. In 1861, he enlisted in the 18th Ohio Infantry (Rice, p. 23). After his term expired, Biggs then enlisted in the 2nd West Virginia Volunteer Cavalry. The regiment was involved in a number of campaigns and Biggs was ultimately mustered out with the rest of the regiment on the 4th of July, 1865 (Stevens, 1995). After the Civil War, cobblers were no longer needed because shoes became a manufactured commodity. Biggs became the postmaster of Chester, Ohio, and then moved to Lincoln County in March, 1873 because of the land that was available to Civil War veterans (Rice, 1980). He located an available claim in the southwestern part of the county and built a cabin (Heaton, 1914).

Biggs returned to his involvement in education in 1876 when he was elected the fourth Lincoln County superintendent of schools. He alternated between being county superintendent and teacher for the next 30 years and organized most of the school districts in the county (Rice, 1980). By 1881, he was supervising seventy-six school districts in Lincoln County. In addition, he organized a Normal School for the purpose of training teachers in 1877 that began with twenty-three pupils. By 1892, 155 people were attending the Normal School (Columbian History of Education in Kansas, 1893).

One of the jobs of the county superintendent was to make “surprise” visits to schools. These visits lasted one day, and purpose of the visit was to evaluate the teacher and the school facilities. As might be expected, these visits were called “surprise” visits, because superintendents would not schedule these visits to schools; they would just show up when school was in session. These unannounced visits were more about trying to keep the teachers focused on housekeeping, recordkeeping, sanitation issues and discipline and less about the quality of instruction (Samuelson, 2000, p. 31).

Records of A.T. Biggs’ work show that in the 1881-1882 school year, as county superintendent, he made 79 “surprise” school visits (Biggs, 1882). Biggs completed a record book that consisted of logs of school visits. The book was printed for that purpose and consisted of evaluation instruments to be filled out on each school district for each visit. His observations and comments regarding his evaluation of the school facility and materials and the instruction were confined to two pages by the evaluation. Each evaluation had four different sections for the superintendent to complete for each visit to a district. The first section consisted of district information, including district number and location; a series of questions the superintendent would answer to ensure proper records were being kept; the teacher’s name, monthly salary, and grade of certificate (Biggs, 1882).

At that time three grades of certificates existed for teachers. A first grade of certificate was held by a teacher who scored in the lowest acceptable category on the licensure examination and was good for one year. After a year of teaching, a teacher with a first grade of certificate would need to renew his or her license by retaking the exam. The second grade of certificate was held by teachers who had scored in the middle category on the teacher’s exam and was good for two years before it would need to be renewed. The third grade of certificate was awarded to teachers who scored in the highest category on the licensure exam and was good for three years (Samuelson, 2000, p. 60).

The second, third, and fourth sections of the school district evaluation were used to assess the school house, its furnishings, and teaching materials. The second section was called “Condition of the School House,” and there the superintendent would note the condition of the floor, walls, windows, doors, blackboards, and the quality of the ventilation. The third section of the instrument was labeled “Condition of the Furniture,” and in that part the superintendent would record the condition of the student and teacher desks, recitation seats, stove, clothes hooks, and water service. The fourth section had the heading of “Condition of Apparatus, etc.” and in it the superintendent would record the condition of the maps and charts, text books, copy books, library books, teacher register, and dictionaries. In addition, each of these

sections included a place to write suggestions. The final section of the evaluation instrument was called "Remarks"; this was the only place where the superintendent might make a note about the quality of instruction (Biggs, 1882).

Of the 79 evaluations that Biggs did of schools, the two receiving the best evaluations were District 4, Fairview and District 9, Elkhorn. District 4 was in the southeastern part of the county and in the area of the county that was settled first. The teacher there was Emma Bingham, who held first grade of certificate and was paid \$31 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 21 children. In every category the school was judged to be in "good" condition, with the exception of the floor and the textbooks, which were said to be in "fair" condition. Biggs' only comment for District 4 fell under the "Condition of School House" section where he wrote "get some curtains for the south windows" (Biggs, 1882).

District 9 was in the northeast part of the county, further away from the towns as they existed at that time. District 9 was taught by a man named P.S. Price, who had the third grade of certificate and who earned \$25 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 25 children. This school also received "good" ratings on all categories except four. The floor was said to be "excellent," and the stove was called "splendid." However, Superintendent Biggs found no dictionaries and no library books. Suggestions for District 9 included "provide more blackboard surface," "move the seats at least 4 inches closest together," and "hang the door to privy" (Biggs, 1882).

Eight districts received evaluations that were mixed, meaning that some of the characteristics were deemed "good," while a number of others were less than good. A representative example of the mixed evaluations was the one written on District 13, Vesper. Vesper was approximately seven miles east of the town called Lincoln and in the western part of the county. The town of Lincoln was the county seat. The teacher at District 13 was a Mr. M.J. Randall who was teaching with a first grade of certificate and making \$30 per month. The average attendance at Vesper was 31 children. In the portion of the evaluation called "Condition of the School House," the superintendent wrote that the condition of the floor was "fair," the walls were "bad," the windows and doors were "broken," the blackboards were "good", and the quality of the ventilation was called "fair." In the portion of the evaluation labeled "Condition of the Furniture," the condition of the student desks were "fair" and teacher desks were "good", recitation seats were "fair," and the stove was "good." There were no clothes hooks in the school, nor was any water available at the site of the school house. The "Condition of Apparatus, etc." portion identified the condition of the maps and charts as being "bad," text books were "fair," copy books and teachers register were "good." There were no library books or dictionaries at District 13. Biggs wrote one thing in the "Remarks" section: "Fix the steps in front of the house even if you have to sell the lightning rods and trust to the Lord for protection" (Biggs, 1882).

The remaining 69 evaluations indicated less than adequate districts, according to the Superintendent Biggs. A district could receive a poor overall rating by either having a school house, furnishings, and materials that were in poor condition, or by having a facility not adequately supplied, or both. An example of a district in which the facility was in poor condition, and which was inadequately supplied was District 27, South Ireland. Located six miles southwest of the town of Lincoln, District 27 had an average attendance of fifteen students and was taught by a man named Francis Downey. Downey had a third grade of certificate but received a salary of only \$17 dollars per month (Biggs, 1882).

According to the evaluation of District 27, the condition of the floor was "good," the walls were "rough," the windows and doors were "good," and the quality of the ventilation was said to be "too good." There were no blackboards, teacher and student desks, recitation seats, stove, clothes hooks, water, maps or charts, copy books, library books or dictionaries. The teachers register was called "good" and the text books were called "fair." Biggs had the following to say in the "Suggestions" sections: "Plaster the walls and paint up on the outside. Get a blackboard. Get your desks home at once and make use of them. When you put in the seats, don't get them too far apart" (Biggs, 1882).

Of all the 79 evaluations, in only two districts did Biggs comment on what the teachers were doing or not doing. Everything else he wrote concerned the facility, equipment, and supplies. One teacher receiving a comment taught at District 19, Pottersburg, approximately twelve miles northwest of the town

of Lincoln. She was Carrie Matson, earning \$25 dollars per month and teaching with a second grade of certificate. About Matson's class, Biggs wrote "Too much speaking. Too much talking back." However, the average attendance there was shown to be 40 children, recognized by today's standards as too large of a class to teach effectively. The other teacher receiving comment was an N. Coover, who taught at District 6 in the town of Lincoln. Coover taught with a first grade of certificate and earned \$26 per month. Coover's class was also too large by modern standards; the average attendance was 50 children. Biggs wrote this to Coover: "Take up a conviction and incorporate it with your life. The teacher should have convictions. He is dealing with forming minds" (Biggs, 1882). This is, of course, a responsibility that all teachers have that will not change with the times.

### **Conclusion**

Biggs was widely acknowledged as the driving force in the development and improvement of education in the early days of Lincoln County. According to Barr (1908), in 1882, Lincoln County was found by Kansas state officials to have the best developed education system as it related to population numbers and "the salaries of women more nearly approximated that of men than in any other county (p. 102)." Arthur Stanley, one of the original pioneer settlers of Lincoln County, said this about Biggs in his 1915 Old Settlers Reunion Address: "Lincoln County...has had good strong men at the head of its school system, but she has never had but one A.T. Biggs and many a decade will come and go before we shall behold his like again" (Stanley, 1915, p. 1).

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