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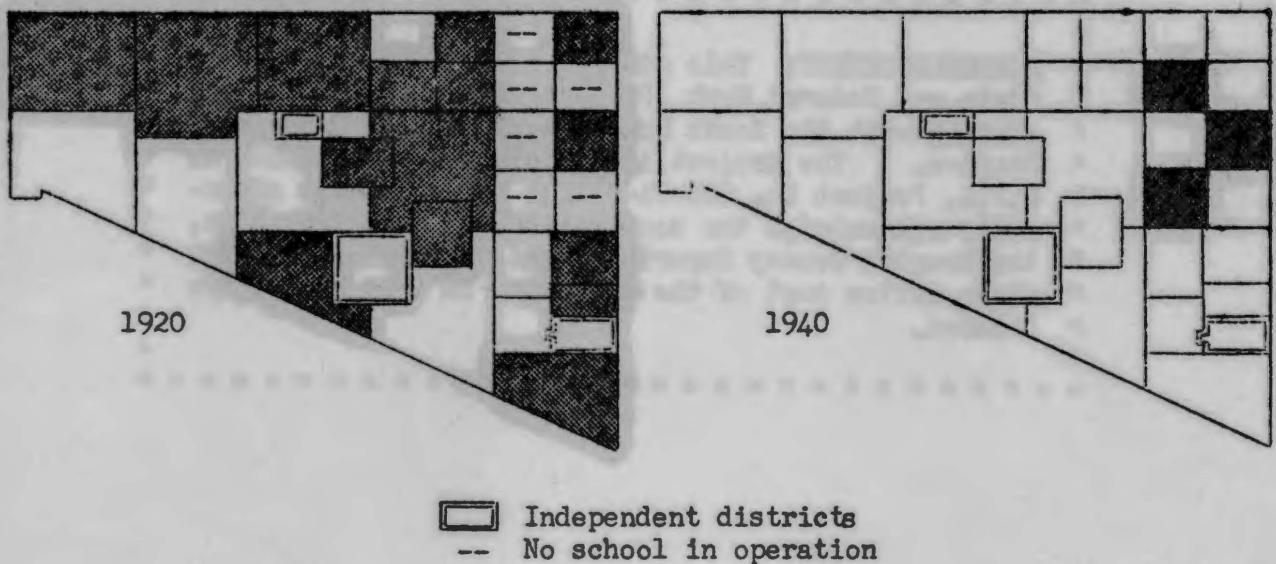
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
the Elementary Schools  
of  
Douglas County

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C. Scandrette  
Raymond Hatch



Shaded areas represent common school districts of Douglas county in which the schools have an average enrollment of 20 pupils or more. There were 15 such districts in 1920 and only 3 in 1940.

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\* \* \* \* \*

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\* \* \* \* \*

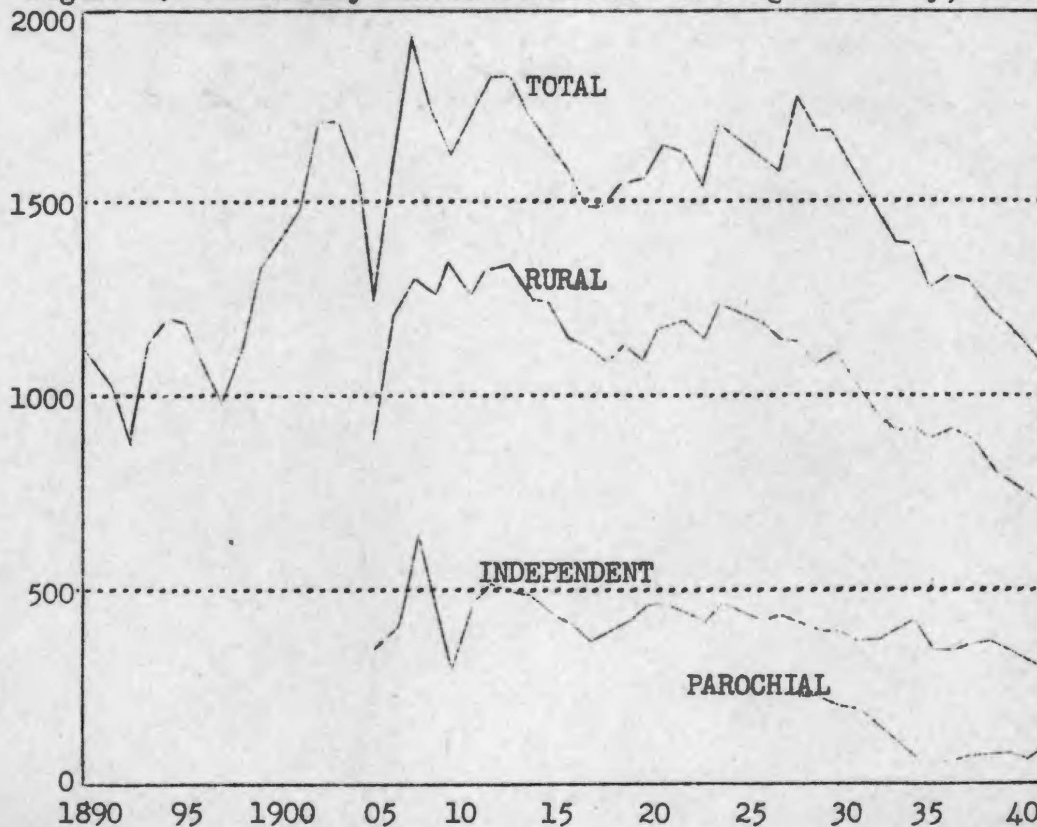
## The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Douglas County.

For some years past, population experts have been predicting a general decline in elementary school enrollments as a natural outgrowth of the downward trend in the birth rate.

The figure below, showing elementary enrollments, 1890 to 1940, indicates that this condition has been realized in Douglas county. The peak enrollment was reached as long ago as 1907, although the most significant decline has occurred since 1927. Both rural and independent enrollments have dwindled, but the rural decline has been somewhat more marked. The total enrollment of 1067 pupils in 1940 represents a drop of 40 percent from the 1927 enrollment, which totalled 1774.

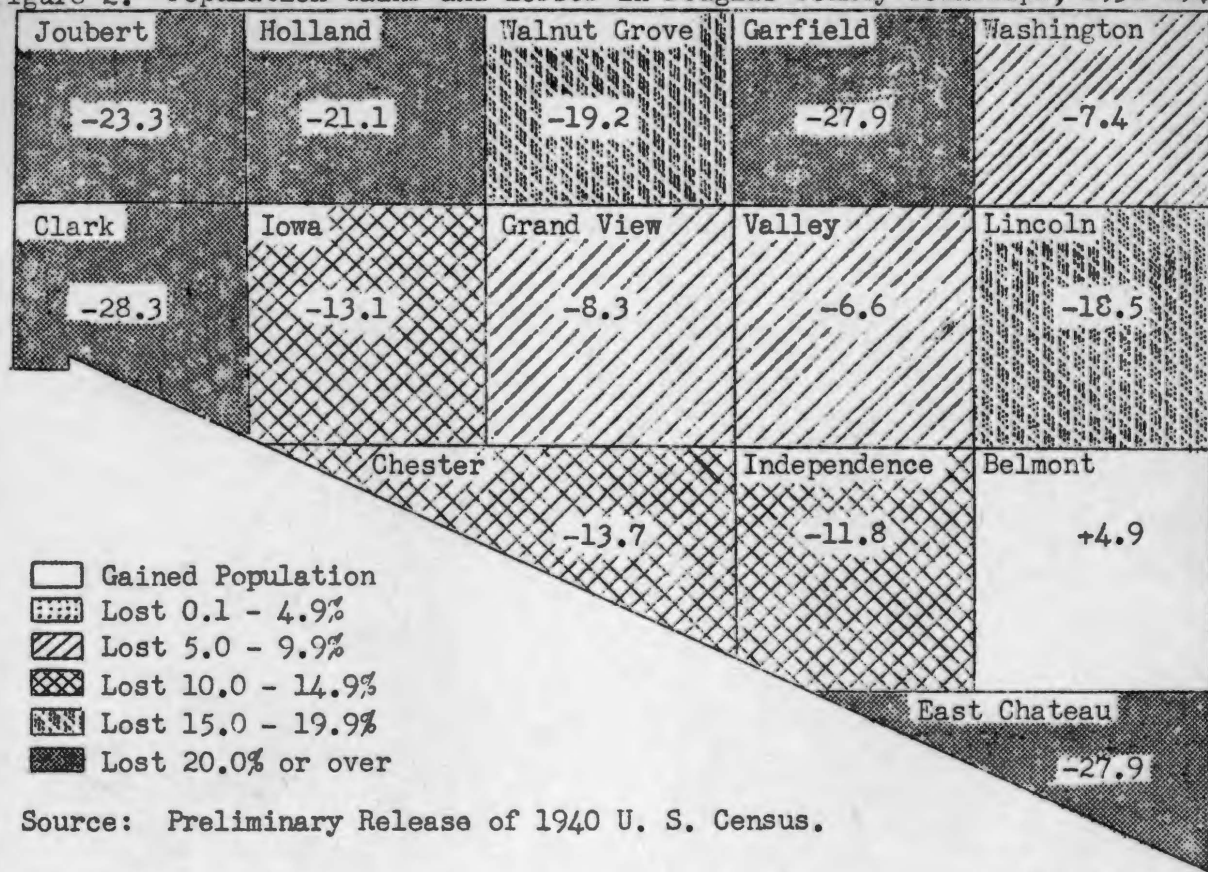
What has been the recent trend in the Douglas county birth rate? A comparison based on figures for 1920 and 1940 shows that in the former year there were ~~only~~ 24.3 births per thousand of the population, and in the latter only 16.4. This means that the birth rate fell off one-third over the 20 year period. As a result, fewer children have reached school age with each passing year. The trend has proceeded to the point where even high school enrollments are now being similarly affected.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Douglas County, 1890-1940.



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Douglas County Townships, 1930-1940.



Source: Preliminary Release of 1940 U. S. Census.

What has been the effect of population losses through migration? Any one familiar with the South Dakota situation will admit that this factor has contributed to enrollment declines during the last decade. Between 1930 and 1940, Douglas county lost 12.3 percent of its population.\* Figure 2 shows the gains and losses by townships, 1930-40, and indicates that population declines have been general throughout the county. Only Belmont township showed an increase, while in three townships--Clark, Garfield and East Choteau--losses amounted to over one-fourth of their 1930 numbers. This falling off of population within the townships can be attributed to migration to points outside Douglas county and, to some extent, to villages and towns within the county.\*\*

The townships which suffered heaviest population losses generally showed the sharpest enrollment declines between 1930 and 1940. A drop of 52 percent in elementary enrollment occurred in the five townships having the highest percentage decreases in population (averaging 25 percent); while enrollments slumped only 18 percent in the five townships which indicated the least tendency toward population decline (the population losses for these five townships amounted to 6 percent). However, the fact that elementary enrollments have consistently fallen at a sharper rate than has the population is an indication that migration does not tell the entire story. The decline in birth rate has apparently been the chief factor in enrollment losses, with migration a strong contributing factor.

\* The 1940 population of Douglas county was 6,343, as compared with 7,236 in 1930.

\*\* The township figures do not include population of villages and towns within the county.

Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Douglas County School Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

|                         |                         |                        |                                  |                         |                        |                                |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (4)<br>163<br>159<br>48 | (3)<br>177<br>162<br>98 | (12)<br>84<br>71<br>44 | (24) 12<br>7<br>4                | (2) 23<br>9<br>8        | (23) --<br>25<br>13    | (1) 61<br>21<br>10             |
|                         |                         |                        | (25) 24<br>16<br>16              | (26) 30<br>28<br>4      | (27) --<br>32<br>21    | (28) --<br>23<br>11            |
| (14)<br>63<br>87<br>41  |                         | Corsica Ind.           |                                  | (13)<br>141<br>84<br>50 | (29) --<br>20<br>5     | (7) 90<br>17<br>20             |
|                         | (5)<br>64<br>59<br>50   | (6)<br>128<br>98<br>43 | (19) 21<br>21<br>18              |                         | (30) --<br>33<br>31    | (31) --<br>18<br>11            |
|                         |                         | (8)<br>39<br>31<br>18  | Armour Ind.<br>242<br>217<br>155 | (20)<br>25<br>11<br>10  | (15) 15<br>15<br>8     | (9) 34<br>22<br>13             |
|                         |                         |                        | (11)<br>89<br>54<br>56           |                         | (17) 15<br>15<br>18    | (16) 21<br>17<br>17            |
|                         |                         |                        |                                  |                         | (10)<br>44<br>28<br>20 | Delmont Ind.<br>92<br>53<br>86 |

Legend:

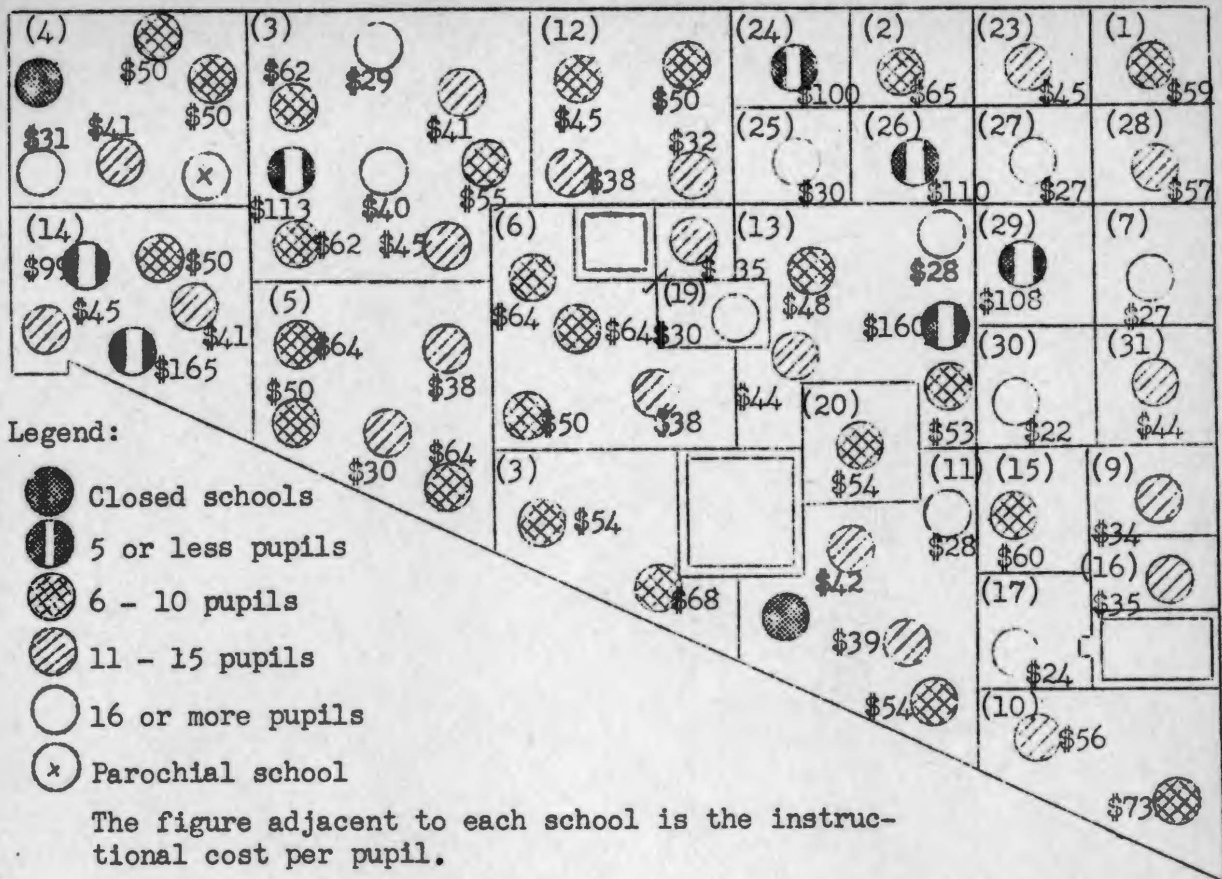
Top figure 1920 enrollment.  
Middle figure 1930 enrollment.  
Lower figure 1940 enrollment.

Source: Records of Douglas County Superintendent of Schools.

In 1940, 62 elementary schools were being operated within 28 common districts of Douglas county. In addition there were three independent districts located at Armour, Corsica and Delmont. Douglas county combines the small, one-school district system, as found in the eastern and northeastern sections of the county, with the large township type of school district organization.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollments of each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. It is readily seen that declines have occurred in independent as well as rural districts, although the losses in the former were not so pronounced. Two schools had been closed by 1940, and seven others were operating with five or fewer pupils. Exactly one-half of the common schools enrolled 10 or fewer pupils. A comparison of enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1940 Douglas county schools enrolled an average of 11.5 pupils, as compared with 20.5 in 1920. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.

Figure 4. Elementary Enrollment and Instructional Costs Per Pupil in Douglas County Schools, 1940.



Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools.

In order to be rendered meaningful, school costs should be reduced to a per pupil basis. The instructional costs of operating common schools of Douglas county ranged from \$22 per pupil in District 30, where the single school enrolled 31 pupils, to \$165 per pupil in School No. 3, District 14, which had an enrollment of only three pupils. It is clearly evident that the smaller the school the greater is the per pupil cost.

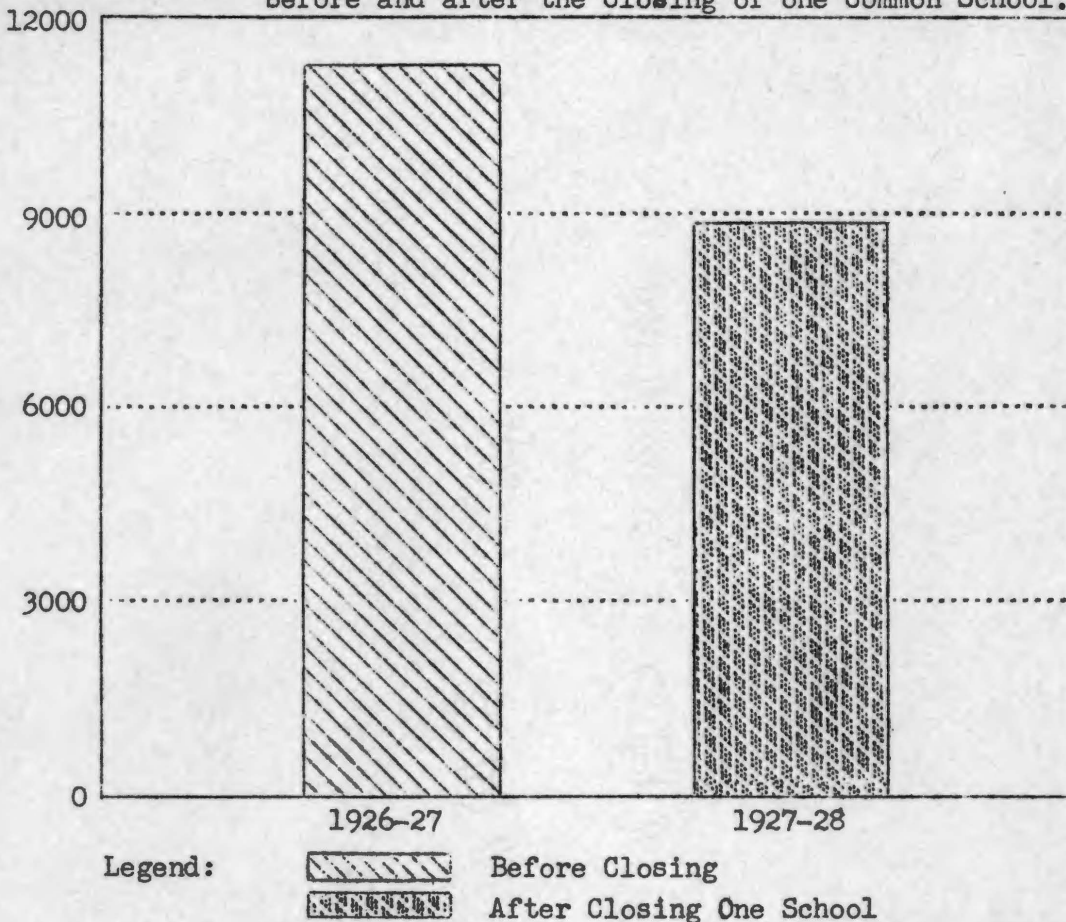
Table I (below) indicates that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. This is especially true for schools having 5 or fewer pupils. The per pupil costs for the seven schools in this group were \$117.86, as compared with the average for all schools of \$44.58.

Table I. Instructional Costs Per Pupil in Schools of Various Sizes, Douglas County, 1940.

| Size of School    | Number of Schools | Number of Pupils | Total Cost  | Average Per Pupil Cost |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Total             | 62                | 708              | \$31,567.50 | \$ 44.58               |
| 5 or fewer pupils | 7                 | 28               | 3,300.00    | 117.86                 |
| 5 - 10 pupils     | 24                | 210              | 11,815.00   | 56.26                  |
| 11 - 15 pupils    | 20                | 248              | 10,040.00   | 40.48                  |
| 16 or more pupils | 11                | 222              | 6,412.50    | 28.88                  |

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools.

Figure 5. Total Costs of Operating Schools in District 11 (Independence) before and after the Closing of one Common School.



Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools

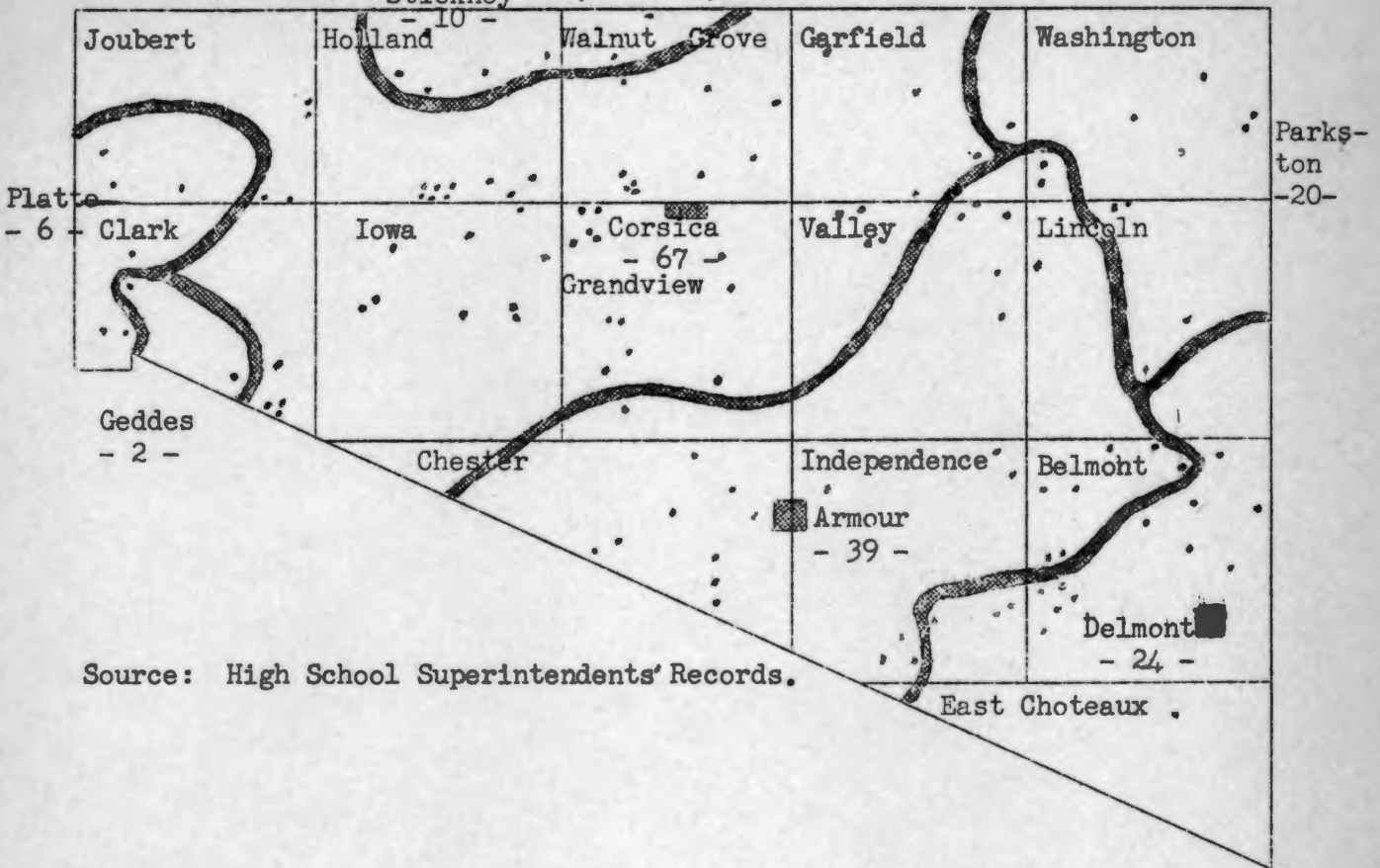
In 1926-27, five schools were operating in Douglas county District 11, with a total enrollment of 70 pupils. The total costs to the district that year were \$11,357.41, which amounted to \$162.25 per pupil. In 1927-28, with only four schools in operation, the total costs were \$8,972.71. On the basis of 63 pupils—the number enrolled that year—the cost per pupil had dropped to \$142.42. Since the costs for operating five schools in 1927-28 would have likely been little different from those of the preceding year, the closing of one school had resulted in savings to the district of \$2,384.70.

To show the extent of curtailment of school expenditures in recent years, it is interesting to note that the costs for operating these same four schools in 1939-40 amounted to \$3,282.90. In that year 56 pupils were enrolled at a total cost of \$58.62 per pupil.

In general, it seems advisable from a financial standpoint to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.



Figure 6. Areas from Which High Schools Drew Their Douglas County Tuition Students, 1940.



Source: High School Superintendents' Records.

How is the problem of providing high school education for students from farm areas solved in Douglas county? The high costs involved make it impractical for the common districts to maintain their own secondary schools; consequently they send their young people as tuition students to nearby village high schools. Figure 6 shows the areas from which seven high schools within or near Douglas county drew their tuition students (numbering 168) in 1940.

This plan presents a possible solution to the problem of declining enrollments. It has been seen that costs of operating elementary schools in a number of districts in becoming prohibitive. Why, then, should the district not close its school, or schools, when the enrollment drops to the point where the per pupil cost is excessive, and send its remaining pupils to a village school, paying transportation and tuition costs? This plan would have the double advantage of economy to the district and increased educational opportunities for farm children.

It would seem that most Douglas county districts are large enough to support for sometime to come, at least one centralized school. As an immediate measure such districts might close those schools whose enrollments drop below a specified minimum, and educate all pupils of the district in the one or more remaining schools. Even these districts, however, may ultimately find it to their advantage to allow the educational function to pass to elementary schools in village centers.

Figure 7. Federal, State and County Highways in Douglas County, 1940.

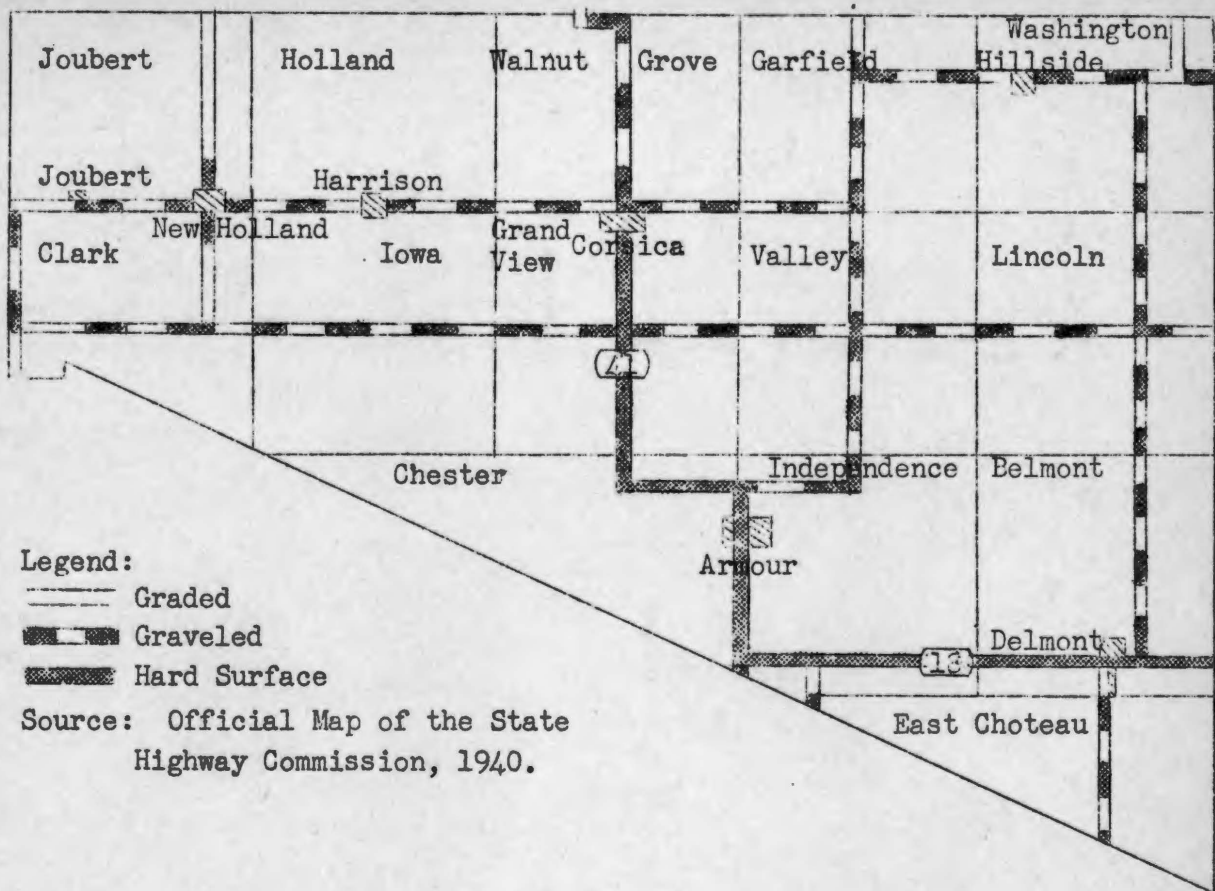


Figure 7 shows that improved roads extend to all parts of Douglas county. The automobiles and good roads have made it possible for farmers, wherever they might live, to gain ready access to village centers within and adjacent to Douglas county. This feature is tending to revolutionize the attitudes and habits of open country residents, and to bring about marked changes in rural life.

Many functions formerly performed by open country institutions have been shifted to the village centers. The farmer now goes to the village to buy groceries; clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to participate in social and recreational activities. As previously noted, he also sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. As the trend toward concentration of functions in the village center continues, the time may be near at hand when the farmer's younger children will receive their elementary education in the village school.

\* \* \* \* \*  
\*  
\*                      Suggestions for Solving the Elementary                      \*  
\*                      School Problem                      \*  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \*

A schoolboard confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study its local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have been tested either in South Dakota or in other states and have been found practical. The first alternative may be applied as a temporary measure until such time as further action is advisable, but the last three suggested plans call for more or less permanent reorganization of the prevailing district system.

\*  
\*                      Cooperating with nearby rural schools                      \*  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Keep the present rural district intact, but close the school, or schools, when enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils. Send the remaining pupils to the nearest rural school in which satisfactory arrangements can be made, with the district paying transportation costs when the distance exceeds four miles, and tuition when the school to which the pupils are transported is located outside the home district.

\*  
\*                      Tuition pupils to town schools                      \*  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Close the rural school and send the remaining pupils as tuition students to the nearest independent school. This plan besides being less expensive than maintaining several small schools, has the further advantage of giving farm children greater educational opportunities than is possible in the small one-room school. It is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in handling the high school situation.

\*  
\*                      County-wide district plan                      \*  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Reorganize the rural school system on a county-wide district basis, giving the county school board authority to discontinue small schools whenever it is advisable, and to determine the location of larger centralized schools within the county.

\*  
\*                      Consolidation                      \*  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Incorporate several small districts into a consolidated district, being certain to include an area large enough to insure an adequate number of pupils and a sufficient base for support.