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## The Problem of Declining Enrollment in Elementary Schools of Sulley County

W. F. Kumlien

C. Scandrette

Raymond Hatch

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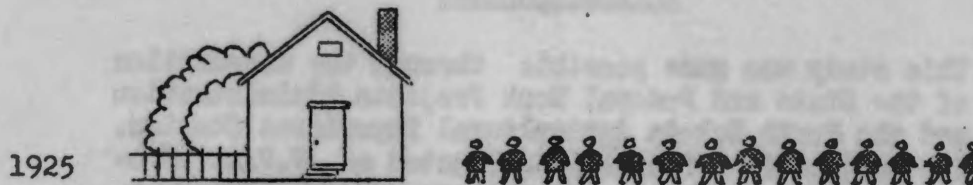
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
the Elementary Schools  
of  
Sully County

W. F. Kumlien  
C. Scandrette  
Raymond Hatch



In 1925, 677 Pupils were enrolled in rural schools of Sully county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 328.

Each figure represents 50 pupils.

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Sully county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for the solution of them, growing out of the experiences of certain South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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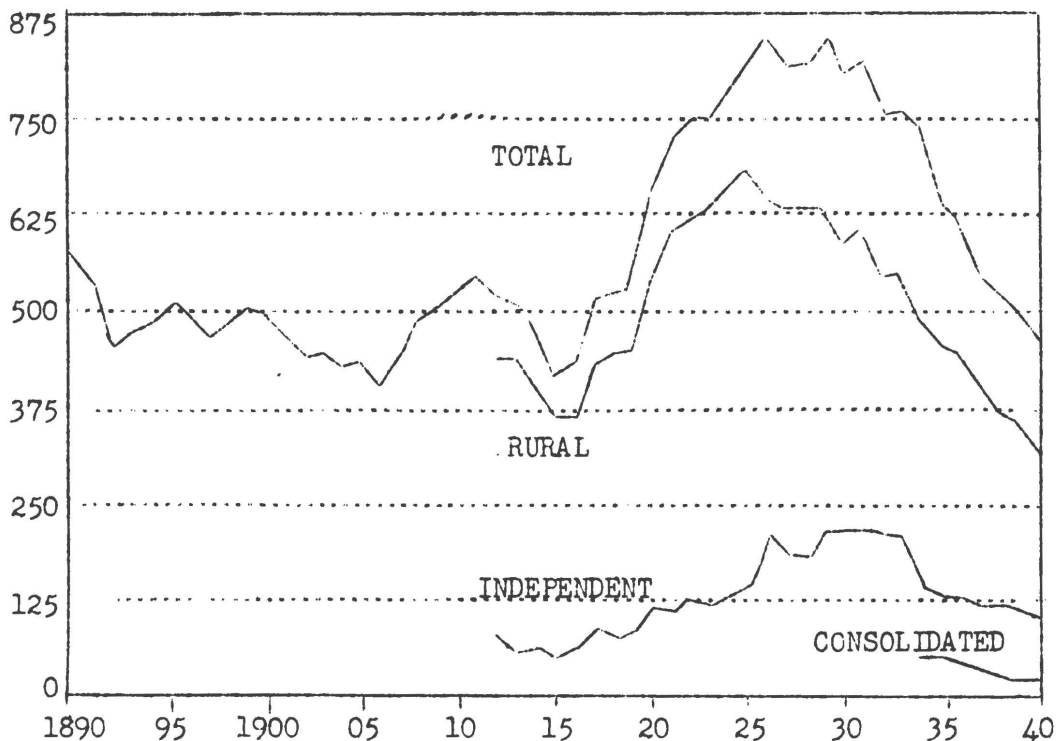
## The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Sully County

The general decline in the birth rate has led population experts for a number of years to predict that widespread reductions will occur in elementary school enrollments.

Figure 1, which shows the trends in elementary enrollment since 1890, tends to substantiate this prediction as applied to Sully county. The peak enrollment in elementary schools of the county was attained in 1926, when 857 pupils were enrolled. The 1940 enrollment of 466 represents a drop of 45.6 from the 1926 figure; The losses were proportionately as great for independent schools as for rural schools, although a portion of the decline in independent enrollments is due to the fact that Agar Independent District became a consolidated district in 1934.

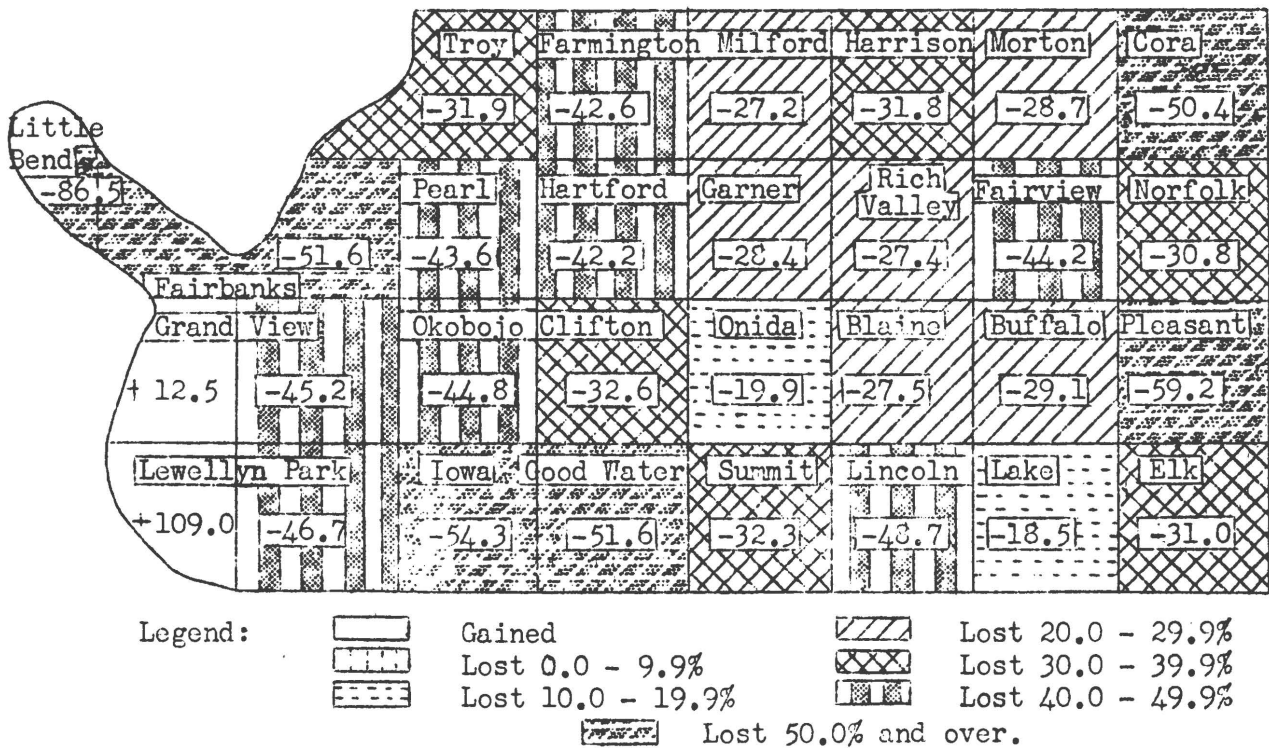
Between 1920 and 1940 the birth rate dropped sharply in Sully county. In 1940 there were only 13.5 births per thousand of the population, as compared with 21.2 in 1920. As a result, each year has seen fewer children arrive at school age. From a planning standpoint it would appear that the situation arising out of the enrollment declines is one of the most serious of the present day problems.

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



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Figure 2. Population Changes in Sully County Townships, 1930 - 1940.



A further explanation for the downward trend in elementary enrollments is found in the heavy out-of-state migration which occurred between 1930 and 1940. It has been estimated that the net loss of population for the state as a whole through migration during this period was 119,000.\* No facts are available as to the extent of migration from Sully county, but population losses for the decade totalled 30.8 percent.\*\* Figure 2 shows the percentage gains and losses in population by townships of Sully county, 1930 to 1940. The widespread nature of depopulation is evidenced by the fact that losses occurred in all but two townships of the county. Six townships lost more than half of their 1930 numbers, while in eight others losses exceeded 40 percent.

As might be expected, those townships with the heaviest population losses experienced the greatest enrollment declines. Enrollments in the six townships whose population losses were greater than 50 percent (the average loss was 55.7 percent) dropped 71.7 percent between 1930 and 1940. Only three of these townships had schools in operation in 1940, although all of them were operating at least one school ten years earlier. For the six townships showing the least tendency toward depopulation (their average loss was 18.6 percent) enrollment declines measured 41.0 percent. It is significant to note that enrollment declines have more than kept pace with population losses. It is likely that enrollments would have dwindled steadily even without migration from the county, but the latter situation has hastened considerably the downward trend.

\* Kumlien, W. F., and Sauer, Howard M., Rural Sociology Pamphlet No. 2, Population Migration to and from South Dakota, Brookings, S. Dak., Sept., 1940.

\*\* The 1940 population was 2,664, as compared with 3,852 in 1930.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Sully County by Districts, 1925, 1930 and 1940.

	Troy	Farmington	Milford	Harrison	Morton	Cora	
	25	38	--	31	25	25	
	18	38	74	17	23	42	
	17	26	30	18	14	12	
Little Bend 7		Pearl	Hartford	Garner	Rich Valley	Fair-View	Norfolk
8	15	16	12	38	45	8	9
	12	14	8	28	33	8	-
Fairbank	13	10	10	14	7	20	-
						8	
Grand View	Okobojo	Clifton	Onida	*	Blaine	Buffalo	Pleasant
27	38	18	10	140	24	37	35
21	40	23	6	138	33	32	23
14	11	11	6	108	15	28	5
Lewellyn Park	Iowa	Good Water	Summit	Lincoln	Lake	Elk	
21	5	14	31	27	18	25	
11	5	16	30	35	23	21	
8	-	--	28	14	29	10	

Legend: Top Figure - 1925 Enrollment  
 Middle Figure - 1930 Enrollment  
 Lower Figure - 1940 Enrollment

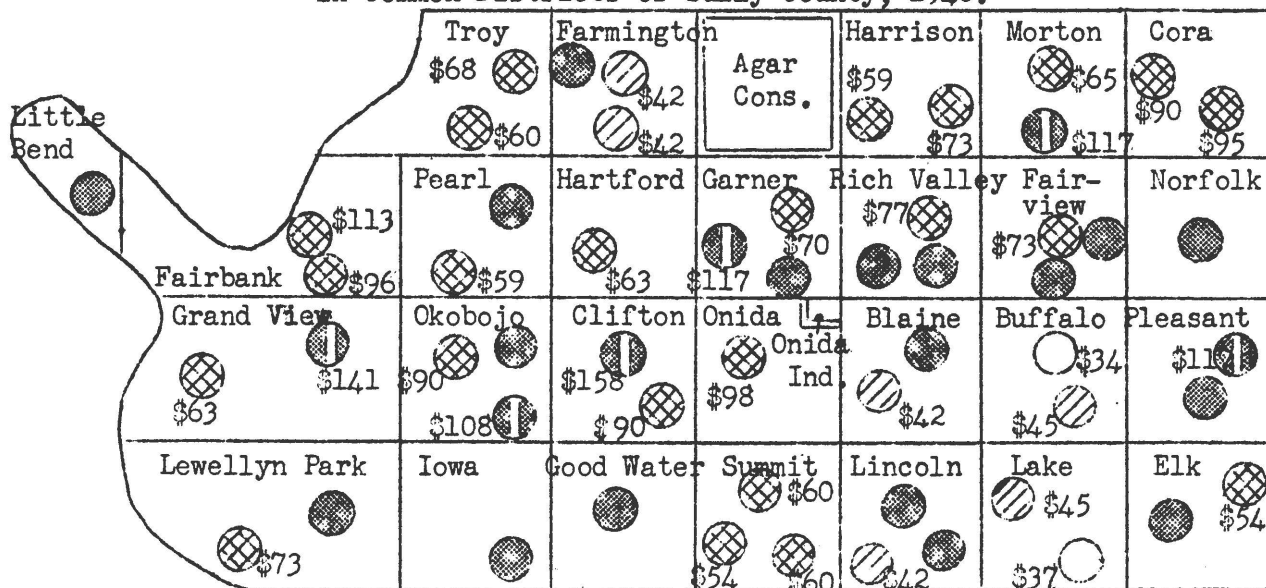
\* Onida Independent District

Source: Record of Sully County Superintendent of Schools

For educational purposes Sully county is divided into 27 common school districts corresponding to township divisions, one independent district, and one consolidated district. Four of the common districts had no schools in operation in 1940.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments may be traced in Figure 3, which lists total number of pupils enrolled in each district in 1925, 1930 and 1940. Almost without exception the districts reported substantial decreases in enrollment over the 15 year period. Eighteen schools had been closed by 1940 (see Figure 4). One-sixth of all operating schools enrolled one to five pupils, while almost 80 percent had enrollments of 10 or fewer pupils. Only 2 schools in the county enrolled as many as 16 pupils. From the above figure it is evident that in a number of instances the total elementary enrollment in an entire township is not sufficient to justify the existence of even a single school.

Figure 4. Elementary Enrollment and Per Pupil Instructional Cost\* in Common Districts of Sully County, 1940.



Legend:   
 Closed School   
 1 - 5 pupils   
 6 - 10 pupils   
 11 - 15 pupils   
 16 or more pupils

The Per pupil cost appears adjacent to the circle denoting school location.

Source: Records of Sully County Superintendent of Schools

It can be seen from Figure 4 that a wide variation exists among the common districts of Sully county in per pupil costs of carrying on elementary education. The lowest per pupil expenditure was found in North Buffalo School, where 16 pupils were enrolled at a cost of \$34 per pupil. North Clifton school, on the other hand, had a per pupil cost of \$158 on the basis of only four pupils enrolled. In general, the smaller the school the greater is the per pupil cost.

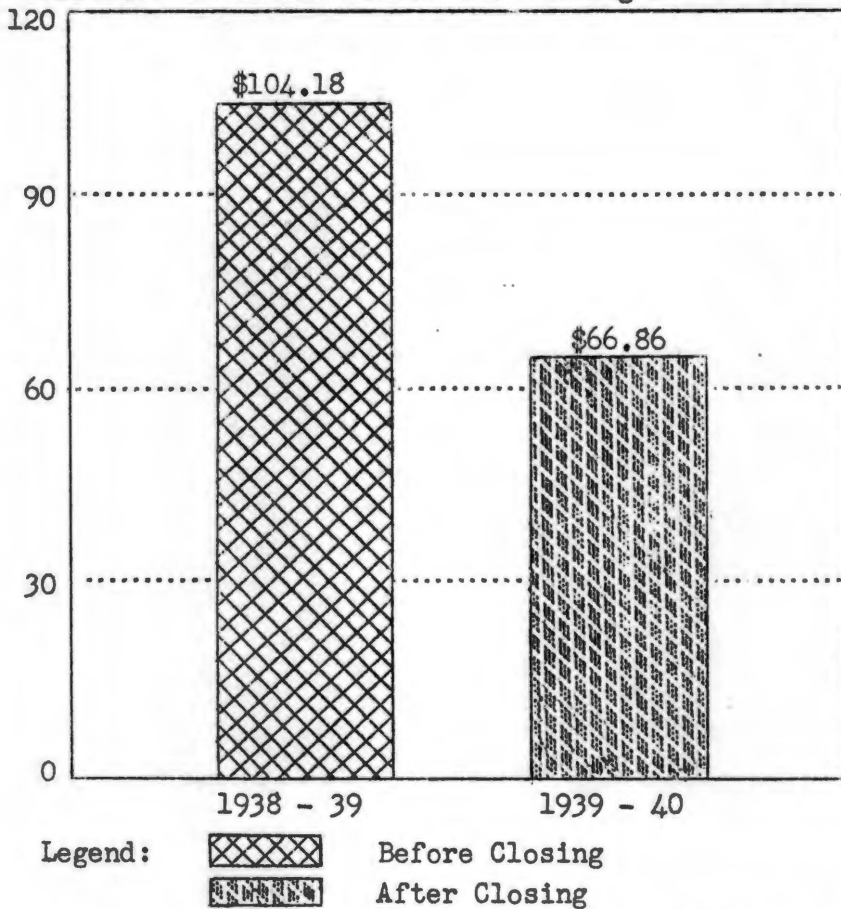
Table I (below) indicates that the operation of schools for 5 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. The six schools in this category had an average cost of \$124.55 per pupil. Schools enrolling 6 to 10 pupils averaged \$71.23, which was likewise considerably higher than the per pupil costs for schools whose enrollments exceeded 10 pupils.

Table I. Per Pupil Cost in Sully County by Size of School, 1940.\*

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Instructional Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	37	328	\$21,424.50	\$ 65.32
5 or fewer pupils	6	28	3,487.50	124.55
6 - 10 pupils	23	188	13,392.00	71.23
11 - 15 pupils	6	80	3,420.00	42.75
16 or more	2	32	1,125.00	35.16

\* Based on teachers' salaries only.

Figure 5. Per Pupil Costs of Operating Schools in Farmington District before and after the Closing of One School.



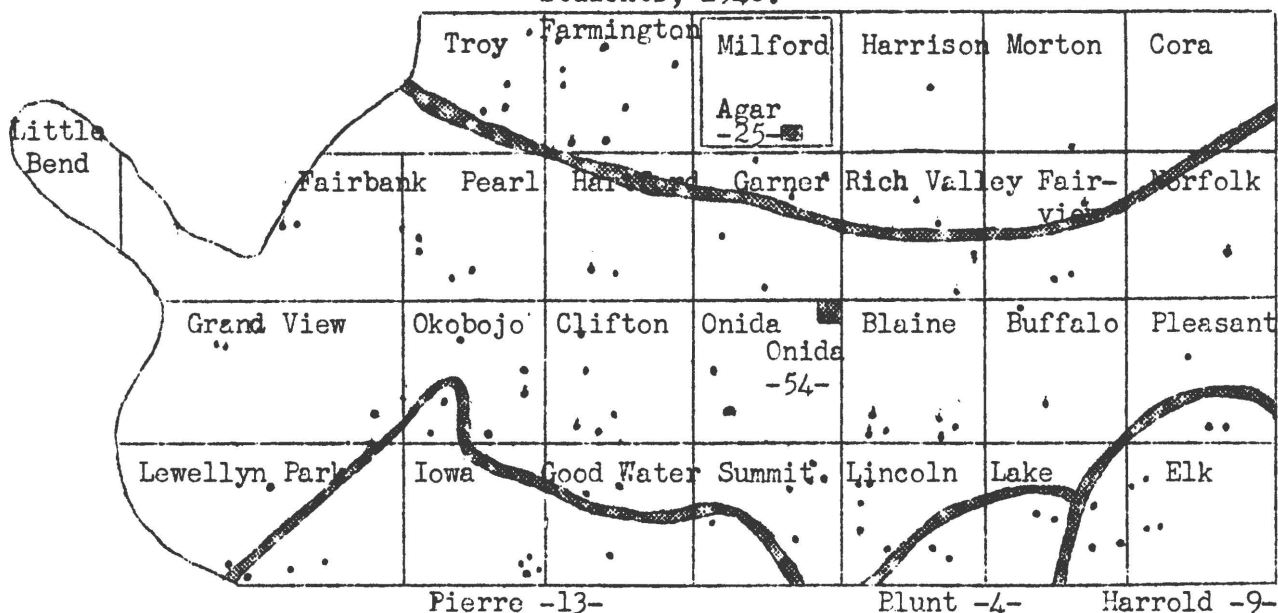
Source: Records of Sully County Superintendent of Schools.

A comparison of the per pupil costs in Farmington District before and after the closing of one school is shown in the above figure. In 1938-39, three schools operated within the district, enrolling 19 pupils at a total cost of \$1,979.38. The cost per pupil was \$104.18. One school was closed before the 1939-40 school term. Twenty-six pupils were enrolled in the two remaining schools in 1939-40 at a total cost of \$1,738.25--or \$66.86 per pupil. The per pupil cost was sliced over one-third and the net saving to the district in a single year totalled \$241.13.

From a financial standpoint it has been found advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to as few as five pupils.



Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Sully County Tuition Students, 1940.



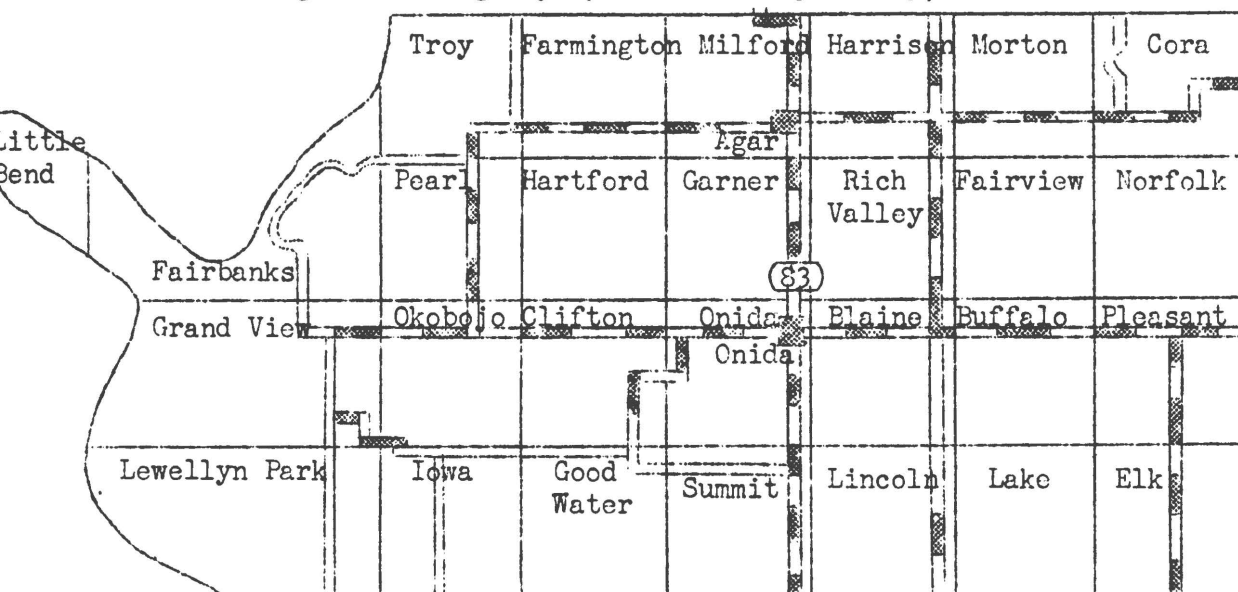
Source: Records of High School Superintendents.

Since 1921 it has been compulsory for a school district having no high school of its own to pay tuition costs involved in sending children from the district to a town or village high school. This has become the characteristic procedure in providing high school education to rural youth, since the common districts realize that the costs of operating their own secondary schools would be utterly prohibitive. Figure 6 shows the areas from which five high schools in or near Sully county draw their Sully county tuition students, and offers a possible solution to the declining enrollment problem.

The per pupil costs of operating elementary schools in many Sully county townships have likewise become prohibitive. Why, then, should the districts not close their schools and send their remaining pupils to village schools, paying tuition and transportation costs? Not only does such a plan hold forth possibilities of reduced expenditures, but it would enable farm children to enjoy the superior facilities which are to be found in the village school.

One limitation to this plan of reorganization arises from the great distances which separate some districts of Sully county from village centers. A limited number of centralized schools might be maintained in outlying areas, drawing their enrollments from surrounding districts.

Figure 7. Highway System in Sully County, 1940.



Legend:  Graveled Roads  
 Graded Roads

Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission, 1940.

It will be noted in Figure 7 that improved roads are found throughout Sully county. Despite relatively great distances, the automobile and good roads have made it possible for farmers in all sections of the county to gain ready access to village centers. The fact that the contacts of the farm family are no longer restricted to the localized neighborhood has produced decided changes in the pattern of rural life.

Many of the functions once performed by open country institutions have been shifted to 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. The farmers' sons and daughters, as previously observed, attend the village high schools. As a further step in the concentration of services in village centers, it is conceivable that farmers may send their younger children to the elementary schools in villages within or near Sully county.

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.