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

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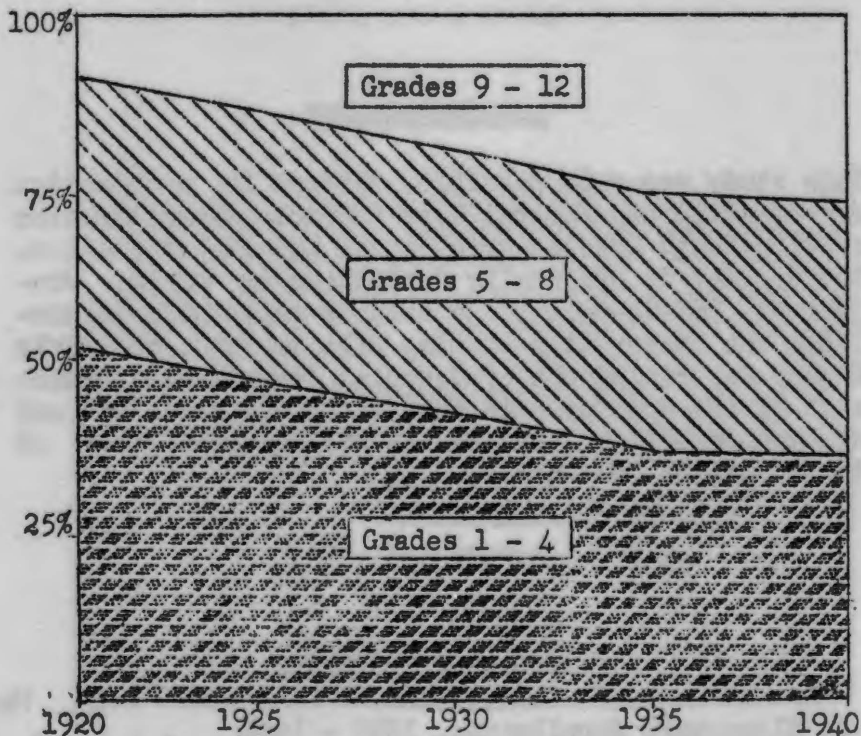
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
the Elementary Schools  
of  
Brule County

W. F. Kumlien  
C. Scandrette  
Raymond Hatch



In 1920 slightly over half of the total school enrollment in Brule county was found in the first four grades. Since 1920 the enrollment in grades 1 to 4 has constituted a steadily declining proportion of the total enrollment; by 1940 it had dropped to slightly over one-third. Over the same period of years high school enrollments increased from one-thirteenth to over one-fourth of the total enrollment.

## 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 Brule county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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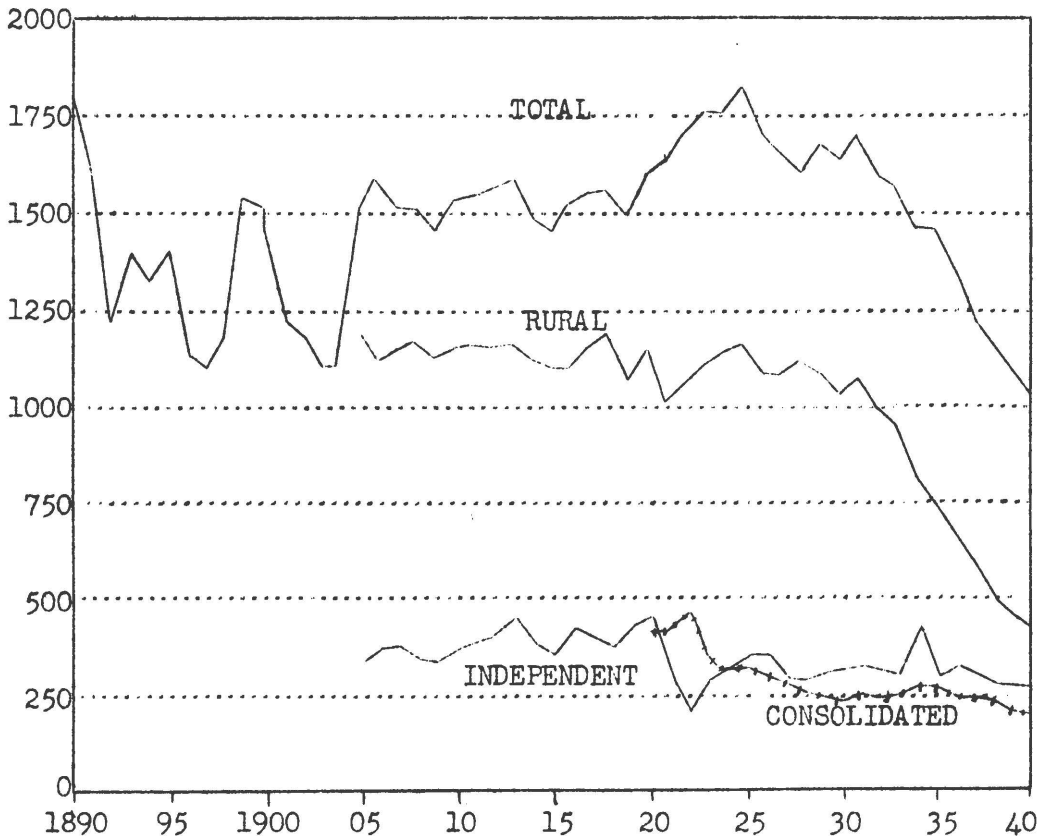
## The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Brule County

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the steadily falling birth rate would result in a decline in the elementary school enrollment.

Figure 1 (below) shows that the prediction has been fulfilled in Brule county. The downward trend has been operating since 1925, in which year the peak enrollment of 1833 elementary pupils was reached. Since 1931 the decline has been especially pronounced. The 1940 enrollment of 1034 pupils was almost 44 percent below the 1925 figure. That the rural schools have been the greatest sufferer from declining enrollments is clearly indicated in Figure 1. Rural enrollments dropped from 1155 in 1920 to 441 in 1940—a loss of 61.8 percent.

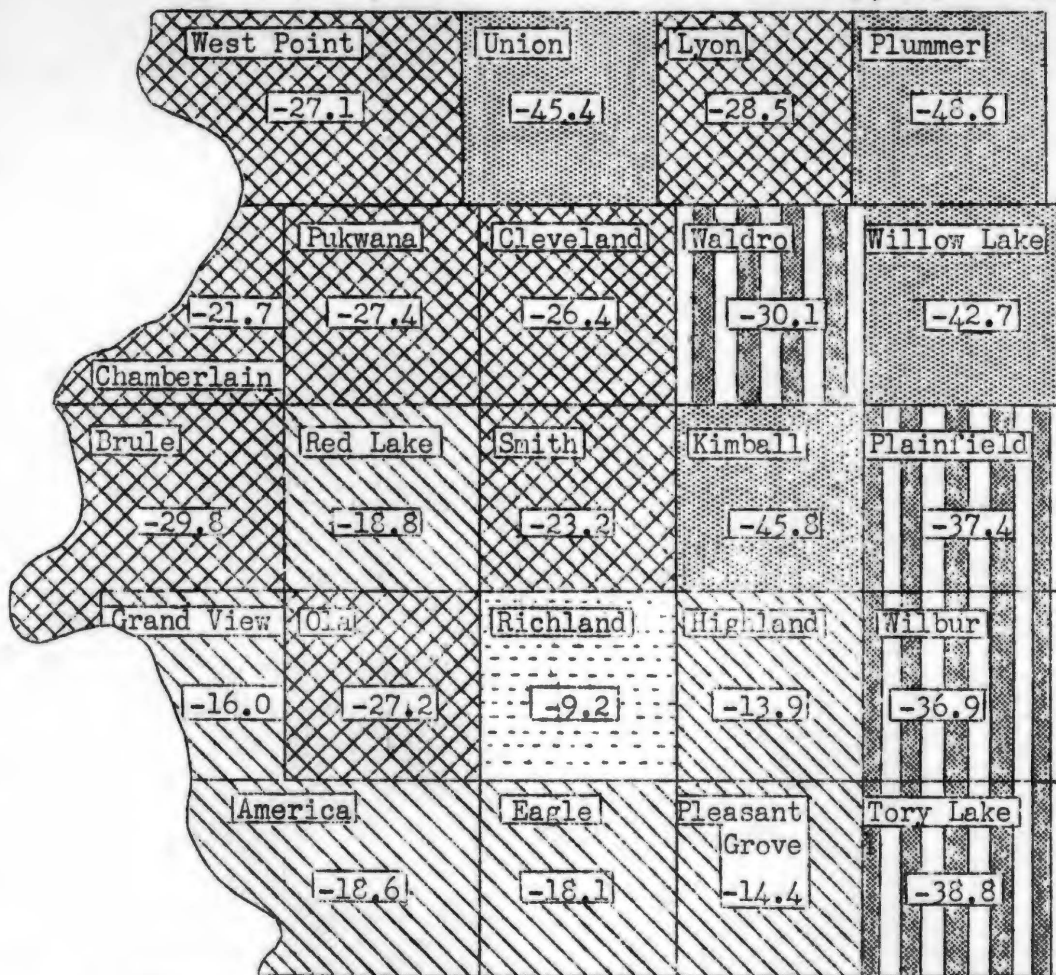
The birth records for Brule county reveal a significant drop from 23.8 births per thousand of the population in 1920 to 17.9 in 1940, a decrease of 24.8 percent. The natural result of the birth rate decline has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age with each passing year.

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



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Schools.

Figure 2. Population Losses in Brule County, 1930 - 1940.



Legend:

	Lost 0.1 - 9.9%		Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
	Lost 10.0 - 19.9%		Lost 30.0 - 39.9%
	Lost 40.0 - 49.9%		

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

In addition to the dwindling birth rate, the heavy loss of population through migration offers a further explanation for the enrollment declines. Between 1930 and 1940 it is estimated that 119,000 people moved from South Dakota to other states.\* An indication that Brule county furnished its share of the migrants is found in the 1940 census figures which show a total population of 6,199--or 16.4 percent below that of 1930.

Figure 2 shows the percentage population changes in Brule county townships, 1930-40. Losses which occurred in each of the 23 townships ranged from 9.2 percent in Richland township to 48.6 percent in Plummer township. In the four townships which experienced the heaviest population losses, enrollments declined 71.4 per cent between 1930 and 1940. The enrollment decline of 48.1 percent for the four townships which suffered the least population losses is sufficiently smaller to indicate that depopulation has undoubtedly contributed to the declining enrollment problem. The shrinking birth rate appears to be the underlying factor, although out-of-state migration has hastened the trend to the extent that declining enrollment at present represents one of the foremost problems faced by Brule county.

\* Kumlien, W. F., and Sauer, H. M., Rural Sociology Pamphlet No. 2, Population Migration to and from South Dakota, Brookings, South Dakota, September, 1940.

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

(27) 18 8 8	(29) 18 20 7	(4) 12 -	(3) 55 56 12	(2) 33 51 25	(1) 32 35 13
(5) 22 28 203 249 220	(25) 5 10 10 11 11 12	(24) 17 19 -- 68 49	(7) 42 50 33	(8) 50 15 10 227 233 197	(9) 41 55 12
(14) 51 40 25	(13) 47 20 9	34	(12) 25 52 6	(11) 28 21	(10) 60 57 28
(23) -- 12 7	(15) 44 26 13 16 8	(32) -- 10 4	(16) 62 54 27	(17) 35 42 13	(18) 58 46 23
(22) 61 55 37			(21) 98 55 22	(20) 44 35 25	(19) 69 95 32

Legend: Top figure - 1920 enrollment  
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment  
Lower figure - 1940 enrollment

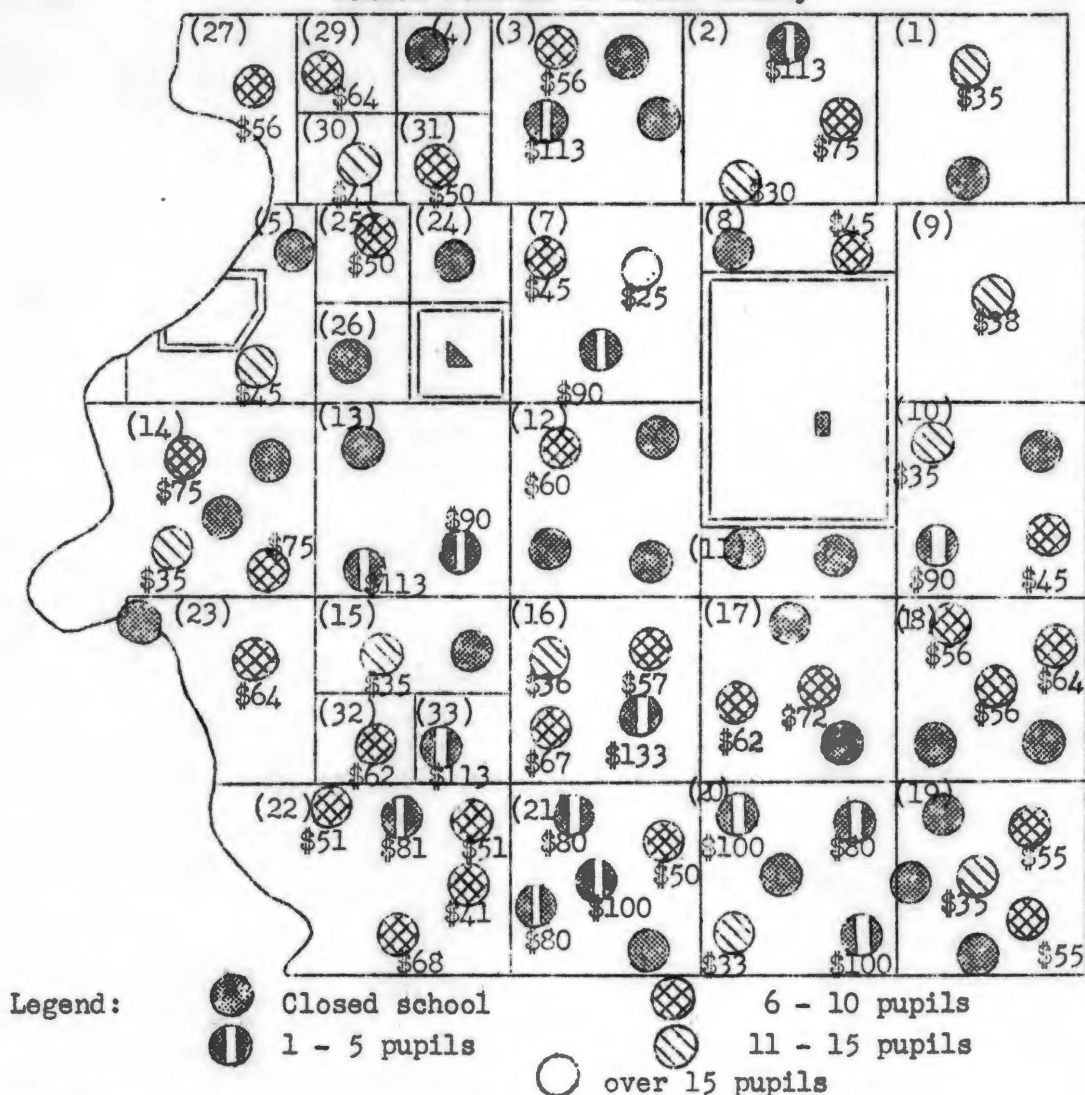
Source: Records of Brule County Superintendent of Schools

Brule County with 31 common school districts, had 55 common schools in operation during the 1939-40 term. In addition, there were two independent districts and one consolidated district in operation.\* As in other counties in central South Dakota, the school districts for the main part are organized on the township plan.

Figure 2 shows the widespread nature of enrollment declines in Brule county districts. The 1920, 1930 and 1940 enrollments are shown for each district. In only one was the 1940 enrollment higher than that for 1920. Four districts had no schools operating in 1940 and were sending their remaining pupils to other districts. In all, 28 closed schools were to be found in Brule county during the 1939-40 term. More than three-fourths of all schools in operation had ten or fewer pupils enrolled and well over one-fourth had five pupils or less. In 1930 the average rural school enrollment was slightly more than 14 pupils but by 1940 the average enrollment had dropped to 8 pupils.

\* Two parochial schools enrolled a total of 139 elementary pupils in 1940.

Figure 4. Elementary Enrollment and Instructional Cost per Pupil in Common Schools of Brule County\*



The figure below the school site is the cost per pupil.  
 Source: Records of Brule County Superintendent of Schools.

The variation in costs of maintaining schools as computed on a per pupil basis is shown in Figure 4. In 1940, instructional costs ranged from \$25 in the Fairview school, district number 7, which enrolled 18 pupils, to \$133.33 in the Bendon school, district number 16, where only three pupils were enrolled. Figure 4 shows that the smaller the school enrollment, the greater is the per pupil cost.

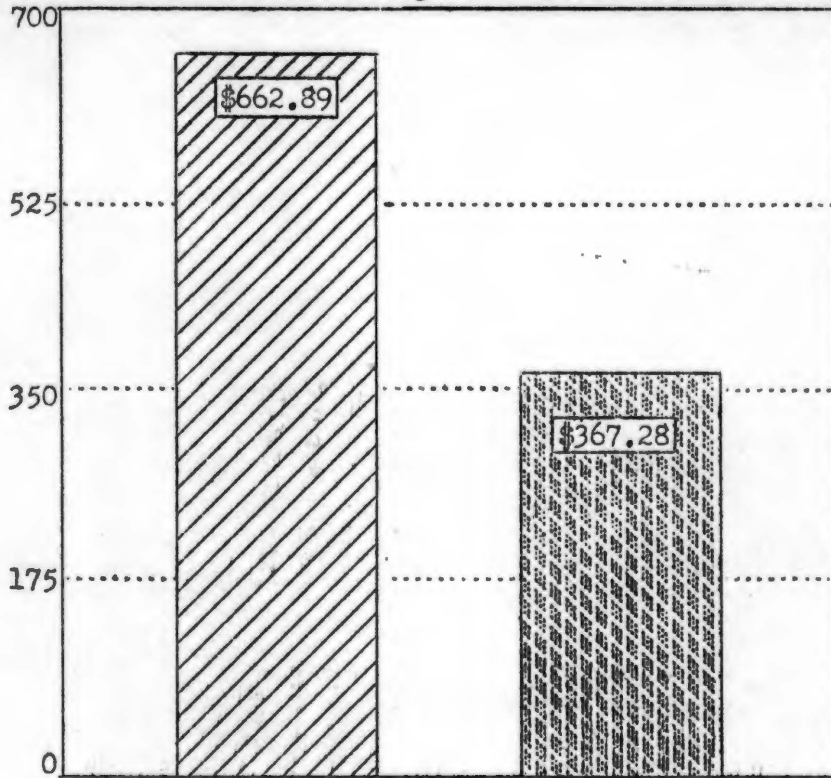
Table I (below) indicates that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis, especially in those instances in which the enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils. Costs in the latter group of schools averaged \$96.29 per pupil as compared with an average for all schools of \$54.68.



Table I. Cost of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Brule County, 1940.\*

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	55	441	\$24,114.00	\$54.68
5 or less	15	66	6,355.00	96.29
6 - 10 pupils	28	218	12,324.00	56.53
11 - 15 pupils	11	139	4,985.00	35.86
16 or more pupils	1	18	450.00	25.00

\* Based on teachers' salaries only.

Figure 5. Costs of Elementary Education in Pukwana District No. 26. before and after Closing the District School



Legend:  Before Closing  After Closing

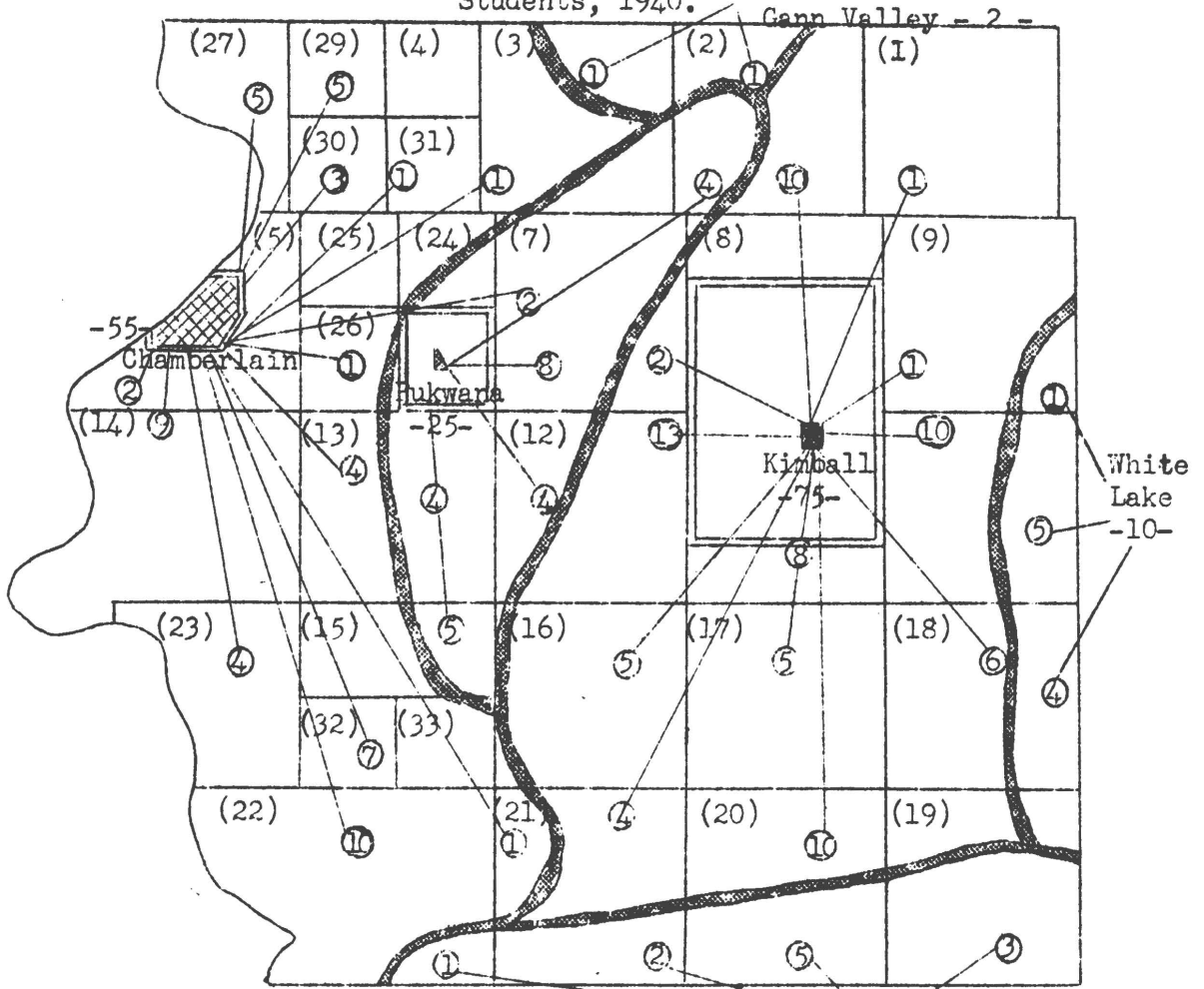
Source: Records of Brule County Superintendent of Schools.

One of the twenty-eight rural schools in Brule county which were closed because of the declining enrollment is in Pukwana District Number 26. It enrolled 4 pupils in 1938-39, with the total cost for maintaining the school amounting to \$662.89. The next year the school was closed and the pupils were sent as tuition students to another school. With a total expenditure of \$367.28 in 1940, the district had a net saving of \$295.61. The treasurers' reports for all districts having one or more closed schools show that in each case a substantial saving was effected by closing a school whose enrollment had dropped to a minimum.

The experience of school districts in Brule county, as well as other South Dakota counties, shows that it is advisable to close a school whenever the enrollment drops to as few as five pupils.



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



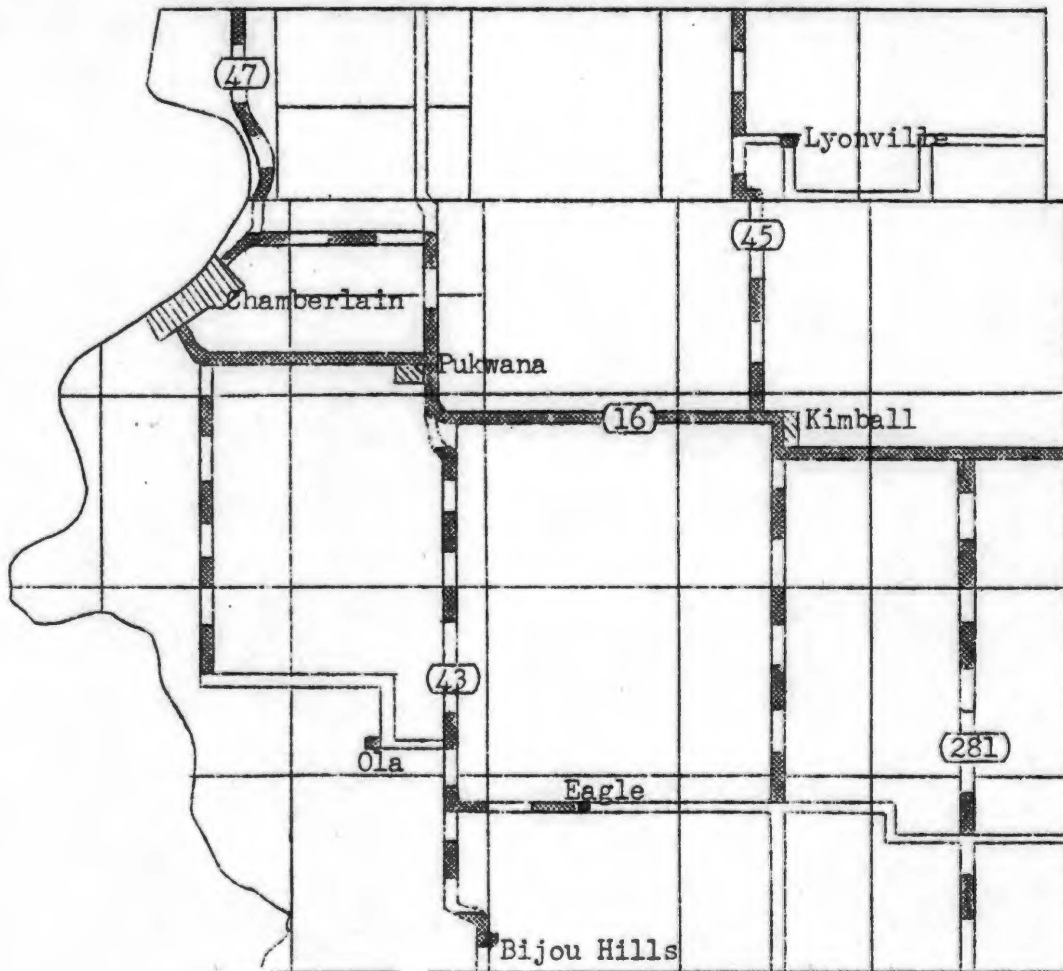
Source: Records of High School Superintendents




Platte  
-11-

Figure 6 shows the areas from which each high school in or near Brule county enrolls its tuition students from open country sections of Brule county. It will be noted that some 180 students from outlying districts attended six high schools located in town and village centers.

Because of the high cost of maintaining their own secondary schools, the common districts of the county take advantage of the established high schools in towns and villages, sending in their young people and paying the tuition costs involved. This plan, which has proved satisfactory to both town and country areas, suggests a possible solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollments. In view of the rising costs per pupil it would seem advisable for common districts in many cases to close their school or schools and send their remaining elementary pupils to town or village schools, paying transportation and tuition costs. In township districts where the total enrollment is sufficient to justify the continued operation of a school, the school boards concerned can close all but one school, move it to a central location, and thus provide for the elementary education needs of the entire district.

Figure 7. Highway System in Brule County, 1940.



Legend:  Hard Surface  Gravelled  
 Dirt Road

Source: Official Map of State Highway Commission, 1940.

The above map shows that improved roads are fairly well distributed over all of Brule county.

The increased use of the automobile along with road improvements, tended to shift many services formerly performed by open country institutions to the village center. The farmer now goes to the village for groceries, machinery, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to an increasing extent to take part in social and recreational activities. He sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. The next step in the concentration of services in village centers may come when farmers send their younger children to the village elementary school.

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.