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**A STUDY OF THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF POPULATION
IN SCHOOL DISTRICT 8, CUSTER COUNTY, MONTANA**

by

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B. A. Northland College, 1947

**Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**


MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1956

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


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CHAPTER I

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Statement of the purpose. This study was a survey of the geographic and social background relevant to the growth and decline of the population of the town of Ismay, of the Ismay Public School, and of School District 8, Custer County, Montana. The purpose of this study was to show the following: (1) the school problems which have resulted from population changes, (2) the cleavage of community sentiment which has resulted from population changes, and (3) the problem of continued operation of the high school and the alternatives to continued operation.

Assumptions and limitations. When the study was begun, it was assumed by the writer that preparation of the first historical record of the growth and decline of population in District 8 would serve to emphasize the seriousness of the rural educational problems confronting an isolated school such as the one in Ismay.

The data concerned with population trends in District 8 have not been used for purposes of comparison with similar trends in other school districts. The data have been employed to present District 8 problems as the problems of an isolated geographic area.

Importance of the study. Several years after Ismay High School's population had begun to decline, the high school was still considered an important and integral part of the Custer County educational system:

Custer County is divided into 34 districts with 27 maintaining schools. Twelve of these 27 have fewer than 10 pupils enrolled. . . . This county could probably be best administered with an administrative unit centering at Miles City and probably one unit at Ismay which may include some territory from Fallon and Prairie Counties.¹

This study provides a history of the organization, of the growth, and of the decline of a school system once considered of promising importance. The need for such district studies was cited by Frank W. Cyr in 1937.²

The inadequacy of district population studies was cited by R. R. Renne in 1939.³ This study is important because it shows the manner in which a school system was built in the confused atmosphere of a social and economic structure improperly planned for continued existence in the eastern Montana area.

¹"Inequalities in the Ability of School Districts to Support Education," Montana Education, Journal of Montana Education Association, 15:85, September, 1938.

²Frank W. Cyr, "Needed Research on the Reorganization of School Districts in Rural Areas," Teachers College Record, 38:293-315, January, 1937.

³R. R. Renne, "What Is Happening to Montana Population?" (Bozeman: Montana State College, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1939), pp. 1-2. (mimeographed.)

This study shows that School Laws are inadequate, that the powers of a district board of trustees are not clearly explained, and that discontinuance procedures or methods by which a high school ceases operation have not been specified in the School Laws.

Brief history of the problem. Ismay was settled in 1907. From 1906, when Ismay had no communal organization, both the district and the community population grew rapidly until by 1920 the town population approximated 500 and the district population numbered 690. From 1916 until 1956, the population of Ismay and the population of District 8 declined until by 1956 the entire district population, inclusive of the town, approximated 140 persons. The school, like the town and the district, had its periods of growth and decline until in May, 1956, its total population numbered thirty-six. In 1952, when the high school population had declined to eighteen (an ANB of 15.72), the town of Ismay divided into factions over the problem of continuation or discontinuance of the high school.

II. METHODOLOGY

Sources of data. The main sources of data were primary source documents such as teacher's registers, superintendent's reports, letters from the county superintendent, budgets, and records of board meetings. Where records were found inadequate or inaccurate,

the county superintendent was consulted to obtain the needed information.

Of equal importance with school and county records as sources of information were interviews. The use of an interview form, as shown in Appendix A, was decided upon for the following reasons: (1) it was made up as an English class project, and the students wanted such a form as a tangible result of their efforts. Each of five students in this English class was required to turn in one completed interview in connection with a term paper entitled, "A History of Ismay"; (2) the use of an interview form made it possible to check upon the accuracy of information obtained from one person as against the information obtained from another; (3) the use of an interview form kept the interview "on the track," and was instrumental in preventing long digressions; and (4) the use of the interview form provided a method of establishing a written, easily accessible record of the general history of the Ismay area.

Two interviews were conducted with the County Superintendent of Schools, Custer County, during April, 1956. Both were for the purpose of general discussion of the thesis topic.

An interview was conducted with the Custer County Agricultural Agent, Miles City, during May, 1956, for the purpose of discussing rainfall conditions and the nature and implications of government acquisition of land in the Ismay area during the drought years of the 1930's.

Those settlers selected for interview were the oldest in the area and known to have lived in the area from its earliest days of settlement. After they had been interviewed their sons and daughters, i.e., those sons and daughters who had lived in the area since birth were interviewed to clarify certain data which had been obtained from the older settlers. This was found to be an excellent technique since it served to clarify a considerable amount of data which otherwise would have remained confused. Some of the interviews required several hours because the settlers, once started, were hard to "shut-off."

Limited data were obtained by use of a questionnaire submitted to every qualified voter of School District 8. Because of reasons later explained in the study the information obtained was not considered authoritative although it served to indicate the trend of opinion concerning discontinuance of the high school.

Studies of population trends in school districts in Montana could not be found at Montana State University Library. Related literature dealing with consolidation of school districts and regional studies of people was found to be of some value in structuring the background data.

Treatment of data. This study was primarily concerned with the finding, sorting, and evaluation of primary source documents. It presents a chronological record of events which have happened in the

past in terms of reasons for settlement, growth, and decline of the population.

To a lesser degree the study was sociological. The background data were presented in a descriptive manner calculated to explain the cultural milieu in which the school and community evolved since the earliest days of settlement.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature on reorganization and consolidation of school districts.

One of the most important school events of the twentieth century has been the development of larger school systems. Reeder has summed up the general reasons for the trend toward larger school systems:¹

(1) larger systems can be operated more economically, (2) migration of rural people to urban areas has left rural schools with pupil-teacher ratios so small as to enhance the advisability of transporting the children to larger schools, (3) good highways have made it easier to transport children to larger, more centralized schools, and (4) school laws have tended to require consolidation or to make consolidation easier.

Frank W. Cyr has been critical of the speed with which the consolidation movement has taken place, claiming that consolidation actually went slowly between 1884 and 1934, and that consequently much needed work remains to be done in effecting better organized school systems.² Generally, most of the literature seems to favor the

¹Ward G. Reeder, The Fundamentals of Public School Administration (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953, pp. 399-401.

²Frank W. Cyr, "Needed Research on the Reorganization of School Districts in Rural Areas," Teachers College Record, 38:293, January, 1937.

consolidation movement; however, much of the literature warns that the needs of the individual and of the community should not be overlooked in the consolidation process.

The literature of sociology has been most critical of the methods of consolidation and of redistricting, because of the belief that the problems of rural education were overlooked in the process.³ Perhaps the best summation of sociological concern would be found in the study by Landis:

Although the school consolidation movement represents the greatest single step in the advance of rural education in recent years, it does not present a universal solution for the rural school problem, there being areas in America which are so sparsely settled and which always will be because of the nature of the economic enterprise (for example, cattle ranching in mountainous or dry plains areas), that there is no practical way to consolidate their schools.⁴

Literature generally pertinent to this study. The writer was unable to find any research at the Montana State University Library dealing with population trends in Montana school districts. However, R. R. Renne has written on the general trend of population in Montana.⁵

³ Charles P. Loomis, and J. Allan Beegle, Rural Social Systems (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950), pp. 493-496.

⁴ Paul H. Landis, Rural Life in Process (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1940), p. 373.

⁵ R. R. Renne, "What Is Happening to Montana Population?" (Bozeman: Montana State College, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1939), pp. 1-13. (Mimeographed).

Browder and Hoflich have made a study of Population and Income in Montana,⁶ which has provided useful data on population trends both in counties and in the State of Montana. Paul Meadows has provided important data on rural shifts of population in Montana in which he has shown what changes have taken place in the number of rural-farms and rural-nonfarms.⁷

Probably one of the finest books recently written on plains life, which is concerned with the sociological and psychological factors pertinent to the settlement and organization of plains life, is Kraenzel's, The Great Plains in Transition.⁸ One of the better books concerned with the problems of rural education is that written by Butterworth and Dawson, The Modern Rural School. The book is written, as the authors say, ". . . upon a broad concept of what comprises the field of rural education. . . ."⁹

Recommendations found in the literature. One of the thoughts which seems to dominate the literature concerned with rural education is that

⁶ W. Gordon Browder, and Harold J. Hoflich, Population and Income in Montana (Missoula: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, School of Business Administration, Montana State University, 1953), pp. 1-46.

⁷ Paul Meadows, "The People of Montana," The Montana Study (Missoula: Montana State University, 1945), pp. 1-36.

⁸ Carl F. Kraenzel, The Great Plains in Transition (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955).

⁹ Julian E. Butterworth, and Howard A. Dawson, The Modern Rural School (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1952), p. vii.

America must reserve a place for both rural and urban schools, i. e., that there should be equalization of educational opportunity for both the rural and urban child. Dawson said:

Under the ideals of American democracy there must be equality of educational opportunity which of course does not mean identical opportunities for all. This ideal will never be attained until the states and the nation see to it that adequate, modern, American standard public schools are made available to these several million underprivileged rural American children.¹⁰

A recommendation for more research on population data was made by Renne in 1939:

. . . .The only population data available since that time (1930) are: (1) those showing the number of children 6 to 21 years of age and those under 6, which are secured in October of each year through the census taken by the clerks of all school districts; and (2) the birth and death figures compiled by the Division of Vital Statistics of the State Board of Health. Birth and death figures do not show the changes in population resulting from migration into or out of the state, while the school census does reflect these changes but does not cover the population over 21 years old¹¹

Frank W. Cyr cited the need for historical research concerned with school district problems:

¹⁰ Howard A. Dawson, "Trouble at the Crossroads," The White House Conference on Rural Education (Washington, D. C. : National Education Association, Department of Rural Education, 1945), p. 37.

¹¹ Renne, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

Historical studies of typical individual school districts should show the local factors in operation. School records, minutes of board meetings, annual school meetings, and the memories of old residents will show the conditions under which the district was organized, the problems that arose as time passed and the solutions which were adopted.¹²

¹²Cyr. op. cit., p. 293.

CHAPTER III
THE POPULATION
GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Geographical background. Custer County has an area of 3,788 square miles.¹ Seventy miles in length, north and south, and sixty miles in width, east and west, it is situated in the southeastern part of Montana.² The southern part of the county is drained by the Tongue River and by Powder River, which run into the Yellowstone River, dividing the county in half.³ The Ismay area is drained by O'Fallon Creek which runs westward and drains into Powder River. Custer County was created out of territory once a part of Big Horn County, one of Montana's original counties at the time of statehood. Created in 1887,⁴ Custer County did not originally include District 8, which was then part of what later became Fallon and Prairie Counties.

The site where Ismay was founded, as shown in Figure I, is in the northeastern part of Custer County. The Ismay area is on the high-plains area of Montana,⁵ at an elevation approximately 2,600 feet above

¹ Department of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, Montana (Vol. III of the Resources and Opportunities Edition. Helena: August, 1928), p. 229.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Daniel E. Willard, Montana, The Geologic Story (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: The Science Press Printing Company, 1935), p. 20.

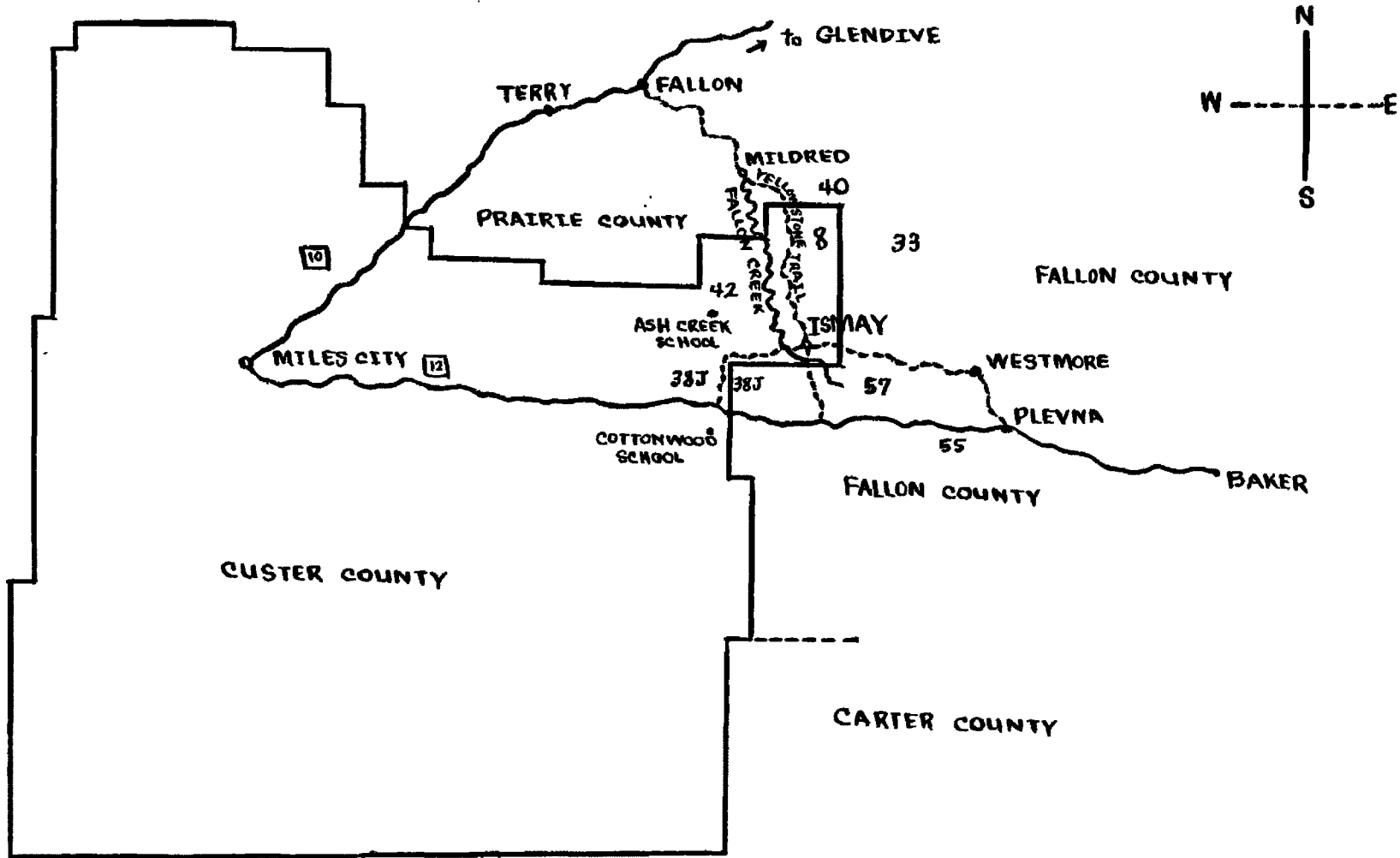


FIGURE I

MAP OF CUSTER COUNTY, MONTANA, SHOWING LOCATION OF SCHOOL DISTRICT 8 IN RELATION TO OTHER SCHOOL DISTRICTS, TOWNS AND SCHOOLS

sea-level. The land is rolling, but in some places sharply broken by erosion or by volcanic action, which reduces the usability of the land by perhaps 10 per cent. The roughness of the land was not caused by glacial action because the glacier never penetrated south of Glendive in that area.⁶

Where Ismay was founded the changes of countless centuries have been recorded more clearly perhaps than in many other regions of Montana. It is an area where layers of snails can be found in beds two feet thick. The vestigial remains of animal and plant life attest to other geologic eras of bygone times. Striated "water lines" on the hills lend indisputable evidence that the area, like all of Montana, was once covered with water.⁷

The soils of the Ismay region range from sandy loams to heavy clays which are usually found in the lower elevations.⁸ Outcroppings of sandstone are abundant in the area, as are conical mounds formed by volcanic action.

II. GROWTH OF THE POPULATION

The Ismay area had been sparsely settled by 1893 by settlers who were willing to settle under the Homestead Act of 1862 far from any

⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸ Dept. of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, Helena, loc. cit.

railroad. The population of the area in 1893 would certainly have confounded the government announcement of 1893 that there was no more frontier, which had been defined as an area inhabited by not more than six persons nor less than two persons per square mile.⁹ The entire State of Montana would have confounded the report because the population density of Montana in 1890 was only one person per square mile and 1.7 persons per square mile in 1900.¹⁰

In 1906, no businesses or settlement had begun in Ismay town although at that time, according to data obtained from early settlers, approximately six families lived near the original town site in dugouts in the hills, or in makeshift huts. District 8 land was unattractive to settlers prior to 1906 because of the following reasons: (1) incoming supplies for farming purposes had to move over the Yellowstone Trail to the Ismay area, which was too far from any railroad to make settlement of a dry-land area a practical venture, and (2) the average annual rainfall in the area from 1881 until 1905, inclusive, amounted to 11.87 inches.¹¹ Had extensive settlement of the area occurred

⁹ R. Freeman Butts, A Cultural History of Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947), p. 446.

¹⁰ United States Bureau of the Census, Thirtieth Census of the United States: 1910. Supplement for Montana (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 569.

¹¹ All rainfall data referred to in this study were obtained from the Custer County Agricultural Agent, Miles City, Montana.

during this twenty-six year period of scant rainfall, it is probable that the settlement pattern which began in 1907 would have been greatly changed because of greater knowledge of the farming capabilities of the area. Had earlier settlement occurred, the heartbreaking truth that was recognized too late, that at least six sections of land are required to support one family,¹² probably would have influenced more sparse settlement. Had such information been known more generally, it is possible that the Homestead Act might have been legally permitted toward occupancy of larger land tracts.¹³

In 1916, heavier rains came to Custer County. Between 1906 and 1916, inclusive, the average annual rainfall for Custer County amounted to 17.11 inches. The heavy rains turned the Ismay region into a verdant paradise when compared with what it had been previously. After the rains, the settlers came in droves unaware that eastern Montana was typically a dry-land region.

Community settlement of Ismay began in 1907 when approximately ten families settled in the town-site building permanent type dwellings. Settlement took place rapidly; by 1908 Ismay had one hotel, a lumber company, a depot, and two saloons. By 1908, as shown in Table I, the

¹²

Based upon opinions obtained from ranchers in the Ismay area.

¹³

Paul Meadows, "Regional Characteristics of Montana," The Montana Study (Missoula: Montana State University, undated manuscript), p. 27.

population of the town had increased to approximately 150 persons.

Rapid settlement of the town was the result of three favorable conditions:

(1) natural location; (2) strategic location for business purposes; and
(3) anticipation of the coming of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul
Railroad.¹⁴

Where Ismay was founded, the land slopes downward from
nearly all directions, forming a saucer-like inversion and giving natural
protection from the elements. The Yellowstone Trail runs directly
through the center of this inversion.

O'Fallon Creek skirts Ismay's southern boundary. O'Fallon Creek,
now generally referred to as 'Fallon Creek,' was an important reason for
the original choice of the townsite. This stream is one of the only
streams in the area which, with exception of the most arid of the
drought years, has had running water. The creek contains fish suitable
for human consumption. Along its deeply eroded banks veins of lignite
coal have been exposed, which furnished the early settlers with fuel
easily dug and costing nothing except the cost of labor and the cost of
hauling the coal to their dwellings.

In addition to Fallon Creek as a source of water, it was found
early in Ismay's history that artesian water could be tapped from below
the earth's surface. Artesian wells were drilled as early as 1910 and

¹⁴

Hereinafter referred to as the "Milwaukee Railroad."

TABLE I

POPULATION TRENDS BY SELECTED YEARS

POPULATION OF ISMAY TOWN AND DISTRICT 8 INCLUSIVE OF ISMAY TOWN, WITH YEARLY PERCENTAGES OF INCREASE OR DECREASE FOR BOTH; PERCENTAGE BY YEAR OF POPULATION LIVING IN DISTRICT 8 OUTSIDE OF TOWN

Year	Ismay Town Population	% Increase	District 8 Population	% Increase	% Living in District outside town
1907*	35	-----	55	-----	36.36
1908*	150	357.14	200	263.64	25.00
1909*	350	133.33	500	150.00	30.00
1910	500*	42.86	690	38.00	27.54
1915	600	20.00	800	22.00	25.00
1920	344	-42.67	429	-46.38	19.81
1930	277	-19.48	341	-20.54	18.77
1940	176	-32.89	242	-29.03	27.27
1950	182	3.98	209	-11.00	12.92
1956*	125	-31.32	140	-33.01	10.71

SOURCE: United States Bureau of the Census. All starred figures except 1956 were obtained by estimates from settlers in the Ismay area. The figures for 1956 were obtained by complete census taken by the writer in May, 1956.

have remained until the present time as the community source of water unaided by pumps or other means of induced pressure. An early account of the availability of coal and water follows:

. . . Natural resources abound. The unfenced range is free to all. Coal is found in all our creek banks. All of the farms hereabout are within short hauling distance of some of these numerous coal mines where the farmer can spend a few days in the fall digging his annual supply of fuel at no cost to himself except the labor in taking it from the ground and hauling it home. Artesian water has been found in Ismay and in the country surrounding. There are four such wells within the city limits whose depth is between four hundred and six hundred feet. Farmers and ranchers who have sunk wells to that depth have not failed to strike flowing water. . . .¹⁵

Along the banks of Fallon Creek, giant cottonwoods more readily available than coal furnished kindling and coal. To the west, some fifteen miles distant, cedars and pines grew to a height and size suitable for fence-posts and like uses. Sand and gravel, although of poor quality, furnished foundation building materials for homes and business places. Clay was so abundant that a brick kiln was set up in Ismay's early days so that the business buildings, its school buildings, and some of the homes were built of material not generally used for construction in eastern Montana.

Ismay's strategic location for business purposes was another reason for rapid growth. On the Yellowstone Trail, its location was between Westmore, ten miles to the east, and Mildred, eighteen miles northwest.

¹⁵ Ismay Commercial Club, "Ismay, Montana, An Opportunity for You," Circa 1920, p. 2.

Ismay was located on the Milwaukee Railroad, which came through the town in 1908. Its location was in the heart of a region that rapidly became a dairying, farming, and shipping center for farm products.

Part of the momentum of initial settlement of the town seems to have been the result of anticipation of the coming of the railroad, which meant revenue for hotels, for cafes, and other businesses.

Ismay was named after "Isabelle" and "Maybelle," daughters of a Mr. May, a railroad superintendent. Two letters were taken from "Isabelle," and three from "Maybelle," which resulted in "Ismay."

In 1908, the population of District 8, as shown in Table I, page 18, approximated 200. At this time, plans were made for construction of a public school. The school was built in 1909, in section 27, township 9, range 55 east, in the north area of the town. No data have been preserved in the local district concerning the plans made for construction of this school, nor have data been preserved in the local district concerning enrollment or operation.

In 1910, the population of District 8, inclusive of Ismay, was 690 persons.¹⁶ The estimated population of Ismay at that time, as shown in Table I, page 18, was 500. Census figures listed the population of Ismay separately beginning with 1920, for the reason that Ismay had been

¹⁶ United States Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910. Population. Vol. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 1139.

incorporated in 1915. Census reports have listed the population of incorporated communities or cities of 2,500 only.¹⁷ The population peak for both the town and District 8 probably occurred in 1915, according to estimates obtained from settlers interviewed in the Ismay area. At that time the population of Ismay approximated 600, and the population of District 8, inclusive of Ismay, approximated 800.

By 1915, the town's business establishments included two banks, three hotels, two garages, one blacksmith shop, one meat market, three cream stations, four grocery stores, one hardware store, one clothing store, one drug store, an undertaking parlor, two millinery shops, two lumber yards, a brick kiln, three livery barns, a mercantile company, four cafes, three saloons, a post-office, a theatre, a stock-yard, a depot, three elevators, a wool shed, an implement shop, a laundry, a real-estate office, and a locally operated electrical power plant.

By 1915, five years after construction of the first school, plans were made for construction of a school intended for high school purposes. The new school was constructed in 1917 at a cost of \$15,500.00. At the time of its construction it was estimated that it would be used for high

¹⁷ For explanation, see Lloyd Allen Cook, and Elaine Forsyth Cook, A Sociological Approach to Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1950), p. 61.

school purposes for a period of at least ten years.¹⁸ Because the school planners had failed to foresee what a bumper baby crop the settlers would produce, plans for the use of the second school went awry even more quickly than those for the first school. At the time in 1918-1919, when the new school opened for operation, the population of the elementary school, as shown in Table II, page 36, was 134, and for the high school, 33. This meant that every available classroom in the new school except one was immediately filled to overflowing with elementary pupils. The new school, as originally constructed in 1917, contained five full sized classrooms; in addition, it contained a library, an extra office, and a laboratory room, all of which could serve in one capacity or another for limited classroom use. The new school contained neither gymnasium nor auditorium.

While the town of Ismay was founded primarily for business reasons, the surrounding territory was founded and rapidly over-populated because of the following reasons: (1) the Homestead Act; (2) above average rainfall for the years between 1906 and 1916, inclusive; and (3) high-pressure advertising.

The Homestead Act proved a great attraction to the people of eastern states who were drawn to the west by the promise of free lands.¹⁹

¹⁸Information obtained from a report by the superintendent to the State Department of Public Instruction, September 15, 1917.

¹⁹Butts, loc. cit.

Under the original provisions of the Homestead Act, each family head could take 160 acres, or a quarter section of land, and after having "proved up" in five years, could then do with the land as he wished.²⁰

While the Homestead Act held out an apparent promise of equal distribution of land, the settlement pattern, at least in the Ismay area, soon dispelled any idea of "equality." What happened is that the first settlers obtained the best land and particularly the land with access to water. The pattern which emerged is that the later settlers found lands available only within an area of "no trespassing" signs and surrounded by homesteaded tracts through which roads were unwelcome. The Homestead Act did not lead to a congenial pattern of settlement nor to a close-knit pattern of settlement.²¹

The second and third of the reasons cited on page 22 for the overpopulation of the Ismay area, i.e., above-average rainfall for the years between 1906 and 1916, inclusive, and high-pressure advertising cannot be treated separately because the advertising was based somewhat upon misconception of the rainfall picture. Neither the railroads nor the local business organizations were too truthful when it came to advertising. Eastern Montana, like all the Great Plains, was pictured

20

Ibid.

21

Paul H. Landis, Rural Life in Process (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1940), p. 28.

as a mid-Wisconsin type area, complete with Wisconsin's weather, verdant growth, and the promise of everlasting, heavy crops:

. . . The climate was depicted as most healthful. The valleys were described as "flowery meadows." The lands were counted as plentiful and rich. And, by virtue of the very fact that there were no trees, nature was described as having shown her kindness. . . . Only will and determination were needed!²²

One old Ismay settler who arrived in the area in 1908 said that he was so attracted by the advertising that he sold everything he owned in Indiana, purchased registered livestock, farm machinery, and farming equipment, then headed westward. When interviewed in May, 1956, he told the writer, in effect:

I arrived in Ismay in 1908. I came west on an emigrant freight car. I was allowed 20,000 pounds of freight. I had twenty head of cattle, two horses, and farm machinery. And my brother. Don't forget him. I smuggled him on the freight with the cattle. He looked so much like me that the brakeman never did tell us apart, even though at times he was talking to my brother. When I got to Ismay, I found little land worth settling on. Some of the sections were still open, but they were hemmed in by other homesteaded tracts, so that you couldn't get water, nor could you build roads through to your own land.

What happened in the Ismay area is that the land was populated on the basis of false promise that the land was greatly productive. Indiscriminate advertising had begun in the late 1800's;²³ between 1906 and 1916, above-average rainfall in the Ismay area actually turned the land into

²²

Carl F. Kraenzel, The Great Plains in Transition (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 145.

²³

Newton, Carl Abbott, Montana in the Making (Billings: Gazette Printing Company, 1943), pp. 363-364.

highly productive units that seemed for a time to make the advertising appear truthful.

The settlers, upon arrival in the Ismay area, tackled the land just as they had tackled it in Michigan, in Wisconsin, or in Illinois. Few if any of them dreamed that the tremendous yields which were obtained were extraordinary in any way. From 1906 onward, the way of life in District 8 became predicated more and more upon a farming structure ill-suited to the eastern Montana region. Barns and silos were constructed. Dairying became the chief industry, together with the raising of corn, hogs, and wheat. The dairying industry became so great that three cream stations were required in Ismay to handle the volume. Registered herds of cattle were built up or purchased. The false structure was to end in tragedy not unnoticed in research.²⁴

In 1915, approximately one family homesteaded upon each two sections of District 8 land, exclusive of the town site. This figure is based upon estimates obtained from interviews, as well as by basis of arithmetical computations which reveal that there were approximately 3.5 persons per family,²⁵ and that the population of the slightly greater than thirty-five sections in District 8, exclusive of Ismay, was 250.

²⁴ Paul Meadows, "Regional Characteristics of Montana," The Montana Study (Missoula: Montana State University, undated manuscript), p. 27.

²⁵ Paul Meadows, "The People of Montana," The Montana Study, (Missoula: Montana State University, 1945), p. 34. Paul Meadows' findings pertained to 1945.

The settlement structure held up through 1916. In 1917, the average yearly rainfall began to decrease. From 1917 until 1920, inclusive, the average annual rainfall as recorded at Miles City amounted to 12.1 inches compared with the average of 17.11 for the eleven year period previous. This caused the population of District 8, inclusive of Ismay, to decline from 800 in 1915 to 429 in 1920. It also caused sufficient apprehension in the minds of local farmers that advertising became more cautious:

First of all it must be borne in mind that Montana is a land of scant rainfall. Montana has suffered in the past from advertising which overlooked this fact. As we stated before, many settlers who had never had any experience in farming of any kind, came out here ten years ago for the sake of a free homestead. They and others tried farming as it is done in lands of greater rainfall. We do not say that all these men have been successful. . . .²⁶

By 1920, farmers had begun to experiment with methods better suited to the conditions of eastern Montana:

There is a great deal written of the so-called dry-farming method. While we cannot go into great detail in a booklet of this length, yet the fundamental principle of the scheme can be explained in a sentence or two. The dry farmer plants half of his acreage each year. The other half he leaves fallow, keeping it well cultivated during the growing season to provide a surface mulch and to kill off all weeds. In this way he conserves the moisture of one season for use in the second.²⁷

While the experimentation which had begun was a sign of healthy thinking, nevertheless there was still no willingness to recognize the

²⁶ Ismay Commercial Club, op. cit., p. 1.

²⁷ Ibid.

possibility that the area was not an excellent dairying location. Further, it can be seen that four years of scant rainfall had produced doubt as to the proper methods but inability to assess the capability of the region with definite conviction:

Ten years ago a great deal was said about Montana as a wheat country. This was the central theme of a good deal of widespread, -- some of it misguided, --advertising. Yet, so far as farming is concerned, we were then trying an unknown land. No one knew for certain just how profitable the wheat industry would be. For four consecutive years, the yield was excellent and it was assumed that this part of the United States would be the wheat belt of tomorrow. Later experience has caused men to revise their judgment somewhat, and today the prevailing opinion among the best of our farmers is that Montana is a land of corn, of hogs, and of dairy products, as well as a wheatland. Consistent trial has shown that milk and butter can be produced here at a profit. Farmers hereabouts are building silos and buying high class dairy cows. The amount of cream sold at the Ismay station shows a healthy increase, year after year. . . .²⁸

The four lean years ending in 1920 had almost halved the District 8 population. A factor which probably helped the small landowners decide in favor of moving was the inflated value of land. Land in 1920 was selling for as much as twenty times what it had been selling for in 1907, when it had brought as little as \$1.25 per acre; in fact, prior to 1906, one of the first large land-owners east of the Ismay area had purchased sixty-four sections of land at an average cost of \$.90 per acre.²⁹ But in 1920, land was considered a bargain at twenty times the latter cost:

²⁸
Ibid., pp. 1-2.

²⁹ Information obtained by interview of settler, May, 1956.

There are some advantages to Montana farming which cannot be found in any other part of the United States. First and foremost, consider the price of our land. The return from a farm should not be figured upon the number of bushels of produce to the acre, but it should be figured upon the returns for a given outlay of labor and money. A farm is, so far as financial profits are concerned, nothing more nor less than an investment. High priced land levies a heavy tax upon the worker. If you have farmed upon land costing two hundred dollars or more the acre you know how interest charges may consume a year's profit. Land about Ismay is now selling between ten and twenty-five dollars the acre which is far below the value which its productiveness will finally place upon it.³⁰

The high cost of land, and its over-valuation for tax purposes, was later to have a disastrous effect upon the farmers. When the depression and drought years came, the farmers could not pay their taxes, nor could they sell their lands except at give-away prices.

III. DECLINE OF THE POPULATION

From the peak year of the population, as shown in Table I, page 18, the population of the district declined with each census taken. The population of District 8 was more than fourteen times in 1915 what it had been in 1907; it was more than five times less in 1956 than it had been in 1915. As the population declined, the percentage of those persons residing in District 8 outside of town declined, until by 1956 only 10.71 per cent of the district population lived outside the town's limits. The fact that the population of District 8 declined is not unusual for the years between 1920

³⁰ Ismay Commercial Club, op. cit., p. 2.

and 1930 because during that period Montana was the only state in the United States which showed decreased population.³¹ The decrease for the state, however, amounted to 2.1 per cent,³² which was considerably less than the 20.54 per cent registered for District 8. In 1945, Paul Meadows discussed a population shift which in some respects parallels that which took place in District 8:

One aspect of Montana's rural population deserves considerable emphasis: the changes in her rural-farm and rural-nonfarm numbers. In 1920 Montana had 225,389 persons living on farms; in 1940 there were 175,727: a shift from 41.1% to 31.4%. The small rural-nonfarm communities, which act as service centers for their surrounding areas, increased in total population from 151,489 in 1920 to 172,214 in 1940: increase from 27.6% to 30.8%.³³

Meadow's study shows that the Montana rural farm shift amounted to 9.7 per cent. In 1920, eighty-five persons lived on farms in District 8. In 1940, sixty-five persons lived on farms in District 8. The decrease in the number of persons residing on farms in District 8 between 1920 and 1940 amounted to 23.53 per cent, a figure considerably different from those relating to general population trends in Montana.

In 1930 a combination of drought and depression proved disastrous to the settlers. The annual rainfall for 1930 amounted to 10.5 inches.

³¹ R. R. Renne, "What Is Happening to Montana Population?" (Bozeman: Montana State College, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1939, p. 1. (Mimeographed).

³² Ibid.

³³ Paul Meadows, "The People of Montana," The Montana Study (Missoula: Montana State University, 1945), p. 29.

For 1931, the annual rainfall amounted to 6.25 inches. During the ten year period from 1931 until 1939, inclusive, the average rainfall was 9.78 inches. While rainfall records show that approximately 6.33 inches of rain were recorded for 1931 at Miles City, settlers interviewed in the Ismay area insisted that no rain fell there in 1931. This could be true since the area is more than fifty miles from Miles City. Following is an account of an interview with an old settler who homesteaded near Ismay in 1908:

In 1931, we planted crops, hoping for rain, but none came. There was no water anywhere, not even in the creek bottoms. We had to carry water from Ismay to drink. The crops never got higher than two inches, so nothing was harvested. Nearly all the livestock in this part of the country died or were sold. I sold mine for fifteen dollars per head; I had paid as high as two hundred-fifty dollars per head. Worst of all our problems were the grasshoppers. During the worst of the dry years they came in droves, and not a spear of anything green was left behind them. In the spring of 1931, when we plowed, the furrow was eight inches deep with grasshoppers before the horses could make a circuit around the field. We had a fair crop in 1932, but we couldn't sell it. We found that a load of wheat wasn't worth the cost of the gasoline it took to cut it, so we had to quit.

In 1931, the settlers who had not been starved out by the depression were forced to leave in search of jobs because the land ceased production almost altogether. In one year without rain, or with only a trace here and there, the entire dairying structure and much of the farming structure were ruthlessly toppled. What was left was toppled by the two severe drought years in 1933 and in 1934. When the rains ceased, production ceased. When production ceased, the farmers were unable to pay taxes

on lands which had been over-valued. Beginning in the latter part of 1931, the Soil Conservation Service began to buy up the land.³⁴ This purchase of land, which was to be administered by the Forest Service, resulted in 5,240 acres of District 8 land becoming "Title 3," or "Land Utilization" acreage.³⁵ Later, in 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed into law as the result of acquired knowledge to the effect that much of the land which had been homesteaded had never been intended for plowing.³⁶ At the time when this study was completed, i.e., in May, 1956, Taylor Grazing land comprised 1,020 acres in District 8.³⁷

"Title 3" land and Taylor Grazing land resulted in reduced financial ability of District 8 to support education because such lands reduced the amount of District 8 taxable property. In addition to reducing taxable valuation, state and government acquisition of land resulted in feelings of bitterness on the part of those homesteaders who felt that they had been deprived of their holdings. Actually, the action taken in acquiring the land and in leasing it in larger, more reasonable acreages was probably a desirable and inevitable circumstance.

³⁴ Information obtained from the County Agricultural Agent, Miles City, Montana, May, 1956.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Abbott, op. cit., p. 368.

³⁷ Information obtained from the County Agricultural Agent, Miles City, Montana, May, 1956.

In 1934, Highway 12 bypassed Ismay six miles to the south. According to the interviewed settlers this was the second greatest reason why Ismay began to decline as a business center. With the construction of Highway 12, the Yellowstone Trail became what it started out to be, little more than an improved wagon-road. Ismay, which had been a stop-over place for tourists, became an isolated community; its businesses began to fail.

In 1935, the Millison School District, which comprised sections 19 through 36 in township 10 north, range 55 east, was consolidated with District 8, which then increased in size to fifty-four sections. The population of the Millison School District at the time of consolidation probably approximated between sixty and seventy since the census cites its population as fifty-three in 1920 and seventy-three in 1930.³⁸ As shown in Table I, page 18, the added population of the Millison School District did not appreciably affect the downward trend of District 8 population.

A special meeting of the Board of Trustees of District 8 was held December 19, 1934, to decide on plans to build an addition to the school building through the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. On June 4, 1935, the Clerk of School District 8 submitted a "Resolution" which stated that a petition had been filed and presented to the Board of

³⁸ United States Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 1,619.

Trustees of District No. 8 of Custer County, Montana, signed by more than 20 per cent of the qualified registered electors who where then taxpayers. The Board of Trustees was petitioned to call a special election to determine whether the Board should be authorized to issue, negotiate, and sell coupon bonds for the purpose of building an addition to the Ismay Public School. The amount of bonds necessary for such addition was estimated at \$22,300.00. The clerk's "Resolution" stated in effect that the amount of money to be expended on the addition amounted to \$31,361.00, of which thirty per cent of the actual cost of labor and materials furnished in such construction, or \$9,061.00, would be furnished by the United States Government, providing, of course, that the local electorate would authorize the bond issue. It was proposed that the bonds would be payable through a period of twenty years and redeemable at any time after five years. Retirement of the bonds after twenty years would have meant that the Ismay school addition would be paid for in 1955.

To the petition submitted to the Board was attached a certificate from the County Clerk and Recorder of Custer County, Montana, attesting that thirty-one qualified signers had signed the petition and that said thirty-one signers constituted more than 20 per cent of the eighty-one registered electors and taxpayers of District 8.

A special election was called to be held at the Ismay Public School June 27, 1935. A total of fifty-eight votes was cast, fifty-three for, and five against. Pursuant to this election an "Application Resolution" was

drawn up by the trustees authorizing the president of the board to file an application to the United States of America through the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works for a loan and grant to aid in financing the addition to the school plant.

Specifications for labor to be performed and materials to be furnished were drawn up by J. G. Link and Company, Billings, Montana. District 8 trustees submitted invitations for bids which were to be opened and considered at a public meeting February 10, 1937. At the meeting called for February 10, 1937, the bid of Jerome G. Boespflug, Miles City, was accepted, the amount being \$32,994.00. A separate bid for plumbing and heating was accepted from J. F. Regan, Miles City, the amount being \$6,800.00. Present at the meeting were the architect and the representative of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works.

Work was begun almost immediately and the addition of a gymnasium and auditorium was completed in 1937. The addition to the school came at a time when the population had been declining for seventeen years; at no time after the addition was constructed did the high school enrollment exceed thirty-two students. From the standpoint of maximum utilization the plant as originally constructed should have contained both gymnasium and auditorium. However, such considerations are outweighed by the following: (1) the addition was constructed at minimum cost through FEA help, and (2) the project provided work desperately needed

by contractors and laborers at the time.

IV. THE SCHOOL POPULATION

General trend of school population. Table II shows that the elementary school population reached a peak in 1919-1920, when 138 pupils were enrolled. By May 18, 1956, the elementary school population had declined to twenty-six, or 81.16 per cent less than it had been in 1919-1920.

The high school population reached a peak in 1932-1933, when fifty-five students were enrolled. By May 18, 1956, the high school population had declined to ten, or 81.81 per cent less than it had been in 1932-1933.

The population figures for the school system indicate a high mobility factor and an erratic pattern of decline. The pattern of decline is much more erratic than that of district population decline, shown in Table I, page 18. The district population in 1915 was 800. By 1956 the district population was 140, or 82.50 per cent less than in 1915.

Predicted school population. Table III shows the 1955-1956 school population and the predicted enrollment in Lemay High School for a four year period ending in 1959-1960. Prediction was confined to a four year range by inability of the writer and helpers to assess data for predictive purposes beyond 1959-1960. The four year prediction included estimation

TABLE II

ISMAY PUBLIC SCHOOL POPULATION, SHOWING ENROLLMENT BY YEAR, AND PERCENTAGE OF INCREASE OR DECREASE OF ENROLLMENT BY EACH SCHOOL YEAR FROM 1918-1919 THROUGH 1955-1956.

Year	Elementary enrollment			High school enrollment		
	No.	% Increase	% Decrease	No.	% Increase	% Decrease
1918-1919	134	----	----	33	----	----
1919-1920	138	2.98	----	28	----	15.15
1920-1921	114	----	17.39	28	----	----
1921-1922	119	4.38	----	37	32.14	----
1922-1923	109	----	8.40	34	----	8.11
1923-1924	112	2.75	----	37	8.82	----
1924-1925	116	3.57	----	39	5.41	----
1925-1926	111	----	4.31	45	15.38	----
1926-1927	106	----	4.50	43	----	4.44
1927-1928	108	1.89	----	44	2.33	----
1928-1929	108	----	----	44	----	----
1929-1930	85	----	21.30	37	----	15.91
1930-1931	76	----	10.59	40	8.11	----
1931-1932	91	19.74	----	44	10.00	----
1932-1933	85	----	6.59	55	25.00	----
1933-1934	73	----	14.12	47	----	14.55
1934-1935	88	20.53	----	48	2.13	----
1935-1936	78	----	11.36	52	8.33	----
1936-1937	82	4.83	----	44	----	15.39
1937-1938	77	----	6.10	31	----	29.55
1938-1939	72	----	6.49	30	----	3.23
1939-1940	53	----	26.39	29	----	3.33
1940-1941	47	----	11.32	30	3.45	----
1941-1942	38	----	19.15	32	6.66	----
1942-1943	35	----	7.89	32	----	----
1943-1944	37	5.71	----	21	----	34.37
1944-1945	37	----	----	29	38.09	----
1945-1946	44	18.92	----	16	----	44.83
1946-1947	44	----	----	16	----	----
1947-1948	53	20.45	----	21	31.25	----
1948-1949	58	9.43	----	21	----	----
1949-1950	49	----	15.52	18	----	14.29
1950-1951	57	16.33	----	25	38.89	----
1951-1952	54	----	5.26	24	----	4.00
1952-1953	41	----	24.07	18	----	25.00
1953-1954	45	9.76	----	17	----	5.55
1954-1955	40	----	11.11	13	----	23.53
1955-1956	26	----	35.00	10	----	23.08

SOURCE: Teacher's registers, and superintendents' reports.

TABLE III

PREDICTED SCHOOL ENROLLMENT FOR ISMAY PUBLIC SCHOOL,
SHOWING ACTUAL 1955-1956 ENROLLMENT, AND SHOWING
PREDICTED ENROLLMENT FOR ALL GRADES BY YEARS
1956-1960

Grade	Actual enrollment	Predicted enrollment by years			
	1955-1956	1956-1957	1957-1958	1958-1959	1959-1960
1	1	0	2	1	1
2	5	1	0	2	1
3	4	5	1	0	2
4	3	3	5	1	0
5	3	2	3	5	1
6	2	3	2	3	5
7	1	1	3	2	3
8	7	1	1	3	2
Totals	26	16	17	17	15
9	2	6	0	0	3
10	4	2	6	0	0
11	3	4	1	4	0
12	1	3	2	1	4
Totals	10	15	9	5	7
Total all grades	36	31	26	22	22

SOURCE: High School drop-out rate, analysis of percentage of eighth grade pupils entering Ismay High School, interviews, population and occupation data.

of which students from the fifth grade through the high school grades would remain in the Ismay school system. Prediction was based upon numerous factors. Table IV shows the percentage of boys and girls who entered Ismay High School from Ismay elementary school over a six year period beginning with 1950-1951. Information contained in Table IV was obtained from school records, except that data pertaining to entry of 1955-1956 eighth graders into high school were obtained from parents by interview. Table V is a study of high school drop-out rate over a six year period beginning with 1950-1951. The average 8.3 per cent drop-out rate for the six year period was taken into consideration to show the predicted school enrollment in Table III.

Table III was made up with the help of high school students and the clerk of the school board. All available data went into its preparation, including a census of every person known to live in District 8 or immediate adjoining districts. Opinions from parents were solicited; occupations of parents were considered; ages and sentiment toward the school and community were considered.

The general age structure in District 8 was considered in predicting the future school population. During 1955-1956 until May, there were only two births in District 8. Young married couples have tended to leave the area because of lack of jobs and because of the low appeal of farm work. As Browder and Hoelich have said:

TABLE IV

ISMAY EIGHTH-GRADE PUPILS ENTERING ISMAY HIGH SCHOOL
1950-1956

Year	Percentage of girls	Percentage of boys	Average percentage
1950-1951	100	100	100
1951-1952	100	100	100
1952-1953	100	no boys in class	100
1953-1954	100	100	100
1954-1955	67	no boys in class	67
1955-1956	75*	67*	71.4

NOTE: Each percentage figure represents the number going into high school the following year. Starred figures are by estimate, i.e., of the percentage of pupils who will enter Ismay High School in 1956-1957.

SOURCE: Teacher's Registers. Estimated figures were obtained by interviewing pupils and parents concerning their intentions for the ensuing school year.

TABLE V

ISMAY HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATE
1950-1956

Year	Girls	Boys	Total	ANB	Per Cent of drop-outs
1950-1951	1	2	3	22.20	13.51
1951-1952	1	1	2	21.84	9.16
1952-1953	0	1	1	15.72	6.36
1953-1954	2	0	2	15.23	13.13
1954-1955	0	0	0	12.60	----
1955-1956	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>9.36</u>	----
Totals	4	4	8	96.95	Average 8.3

SOURCE: Superintendent's reports to the State Department of Public Instruction.

Another important reason for the decline in rural-farm people is the movement of young people away from rural areas. Lack of job opportunities, the low attraction value of farming as a career, and the powerful pull of the city for youth, all combine to draw off the young adult rural group. . . .¹

The area has exerted so little pressure upon young people to stay that the birth rate will be very low for the ensuing years. As the social structure is now constituted, no more than four couples in District 8 would normally expect birth of additional children. The implication for the school system is that, at least for the ten to twenty year period until the land passes into the hands of younger people, the population will not increase; in fact, it will probably decline, depending upon whether the high school discontinues operation.

The occupational structure has much the same implication concerning the operation of the high school. The occupations in the area are not those which have a strong appeal to young people. The main occupation is farming. Other areas of limited job opportunity exist, such as well-drilling, railroad work, or the limited areas for business, such as the cafe, grocery store, or post-office. The tendency in the Ismay area has been toward larger farm units, and the tendency will probably continue.

Location of school population. Of the thirty-six children in the school as of May 18, 1956, ten lived outside the town, and four of the ten lived outside District 8. However, of the ten living outside the town,

¹W. Gordon Browder, and Harold J. Hoflich, Population and Income in Montana (Missoula: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, School of Business Administration, Montana State University, 1953), p. 6.

five lived within two blocks of the village limits. All of the high school students who attended school in 1955-1956 lived in Ismay within walking distance of the school.

CHAPTER IV

THE SENTIMENT OF DISTRICT 8 RESIDENTS CONCERNING DISCONTINUANCE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The issues of discontinuance. Since 1952, the residents of School District 8 have engaged in a factional controversy over the disposition of Ismay High School. Generally, the side favoring discontinuance has been represented by parents without children in school. As the result of continuing factional disputes, teachers, trustees, and parents have been caught up in a constant war of petitions, complaints, and disorderly meetings, all of which have made it increasingly difficult for teachers to maintain a professional atmosphere in the school system. One teacher and the superintendent resigned at the end of the first semester in 1955. Two teachers elected not to return for the beginning school year 1955-1956. At the end of the school year 1955-1956, the superintendent and two teachers resigned.

Those who have led the opposition to the continued operation of the high school have founded their attack on three contentions: (1) that elimination of the high school would lower taxes, (2) that modern methods of teaching fail to produce results, e.g., methods in teaching reading, and (3) that teachers are incompetent and do not know how to teach.

No amount of evidence, literature, or reason has altered the intention of opposition leaders to eliminate Ismay High School. It would appear that the plan of the opposition leaders has been to refuse acceptance of truth, and to offset truth by a constant campaign of propaganda aimed at undermining community confidence in the school system.

The basic reasons for the lack of cooperation between residents in Ismay have been difficult to analyze. However, based upon observation of the factional cleavage in Ismay, it would appear that the following reasons best explain the situation: (1) a high degree of blood relationship has resulted in the District 8 population from inter-marriages; (2) the settlers who have remained in Ismay from the earliest days of settlement are very old and have chosen not to challenge the views of newcomers, (3) the continuous degeneration of institutions has produced a tendency for the population to look upon the social structure as inherently unstable, and (4) families who moved into the Ismay area in the 1950's have formed no extensive feeling of loyalty or attachment to the town's institutions.

In May, 1956, at the close of the school year, seventeen families were represented among the school's enrollment of thirty-six.¹ Only nine students, representing four families, were not related in some way to other children in the school. Until 1952, the inter-related element

¹The writer's family has nowhere been included in this study.

controlled group action in the town. Beginning with 1952, the new families who moved into the area began a concerted, continuous attack upon the thinking, upon the methods, and upon the controls exercised by the original group. Table VI shows that the vote against additional levies for support of the public school changed abruptly in 1953. The vote was not aimed solely at defeat of the high school additional levy, but at both high school and elementary school levies. Table V, page 40, shows that the ANB for 1951-1952 was 21.84, sufficiently high to insure adequate revenue for operation of a high school employing three teachers, inclusive of the superintendent. The vote in 1953 against the additional high school levy would seem to indicate that a high premium had suddenly been placed upon the advisability of discontinuance rather than upon local educational needs. That sentiment reflected in the votes cast against the special levy was inspired by newcomers to the community is probable since no such sentiment was ever before apparent in the history of the school system regarding local voting on additional levies of similar millage.

The inhabitants of District 8 have become inured to the process of institutional disintegration which has been underway for more than twenty years. The people have found it difficult to form attachments to things thought certain to fail. This is probably the reason why the attack upon the school system was left unchallenged to a large degree until 1956; there was little basic loyalty among the older residents and none among the newer residents.

TABLE VI

SCHOOL DISTRICT & SPECIAL LEVY ELECTIONS

1946-1955

Year	High School		Elementary School	
	For	Against	For	Against
1946	23	0		
1947	18	0		
1948	47	0		
1949	27	0		
1950	21	0		
1951	21	0		
1952	19	1		
1953	32	17	30	18
1954	28	27	34	22
1955	33	21	41	14

SOURCE: Office of County Superintendent of Schools, Custer County, Miles City, Montana.

II. THE SENTIMENT CONCERNING DISCONTINUANCE

The reaction of District 8 inhabitants concerning discontinuance of the high school was sought by the use of a questionnaire, attached as Appendix B. A list of qualified voters in District 8 was made up with the help of high school students, the school district clerk, and the county superintendent of schools. It was found that seventy-eight residents were qualified to vote in District 8 at the time the questionnaire was submitted.

The questionnaire was prepared with some apprehension that its submission to the electorate might trigger a renewed community controversy concerning the issues of discontinuance.

The word "abandonment" was used in the questionnaire because it is the term used by school patrons, who do not differentiate between abandonment of a school district, and non-operation of a high school. The reader will note that the data contained on the first two pages of the questionnaire differ from the data later compiled, e. g., that shown in Table III, page 37, concerning enrollments and predicted school population. The reasons for the variation of data are: (1) the enrollment changed between February 29, 1956, and May 18, 1956; and (2) the predicted enrollment for the school system, as shown in Table III, was later made on the basis of more complete data, and was analyzed more critically by more people.

Because of the possibility of stirring up a mid-year community controversy, no follow-up action of any kind was taken to assure a more complete return of the questionnaire. Forty-two were returned on or before March 15, 1956; they were mailed February 29, 1956. Of the number mailed, 53.84 per cent were returned. None were returned after March 15, 1956. Of the forty-two answers received, eight favored abandonment, or 19.05 per cent of the forty-two returned. Four favored abandonment at a later date, two in 1956-1957, and two in 1957-1958. In other words, 4.76 per cent favored abandonment in 1956-1957, and 4.76 per cent favored abandonment in 1957-1958; a total of 9.52 per cent favored abandonment prior to 1959 (yet favored continuation for at least one more year). On the other hand, 71.43 per cent wished to continue operation of the high school until such time as financial operation was no longer possible.

Since only 53.84 per cent of the questionnaires were returned, the results have not been interpreted as conclusive. On the other hand, since thirty of the questionnaires returned favored indefinite continuance, and since thirty constitutes 38.46 per cent of the total number of seventy-eight submitted to the electorate, it would seem reasonable to conclude that had all, or any fraction greater than 53.84 per cent of the questionnaires been returned, the odds would have been heavily weighted in favor of sentiment for continuation. Further, in addition to the fact that 38.46 per cent of the electorate favored indefinite continuation, 5.13 per cent

avored continuation for at least one more year. In other words, 43.59 per cent of the respondents favored continuation for at least one more year.

When returned, the questionnaires contained numerous comments. Some said, in effect, that when a school becomes involved in friction that it is time to "fold-up." Others were hopeful that the discovery of oil in the Ismay area would "change the picture." Most were concerned that abandonment would make it impossible for their children to continue their high school education. One contained the following comment:

I believe that it is the responsibility of each adult taxpayer to help sustain a High School in Ismay because should it be abandoned there would be many of our grade children who wouldn't get a chance to go to High School.

Another questionnaire contained a comment to the effect that business property in Ismay had become quite worthless and that abandonment would result in the loss of the last institution of any value to the community. This comment closed with a warning that it would be better to pay taxes to support a local school than to pay taxes to support a high school at Miles City.

One irate citizen somewhat confirmed the writer's apprehension that community feeling might be stirred up. He said, "The biggest percentage of the people are satisfied it should run. This subject should never have been brought up."

The results of votes cast for and against the levies, as shown in Table VI, page 46, constitute a more valid way in which to assess the district sentiment. A vote sets into motion legal machinery which tends either to perpetuate the school system (in Ismay's case) or to delimit its operation, or to affect its discontinuance. The writer has not wished to imply that a vote against an additional levy always denotes that the voter is "against" education. High taxes have never been popular; on the other hand, it appears that little sympathy should be wasted on those who are unwilling to contribute a little extra support to insure the operation of an educational system.

CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS OF CONTINUANCE, DISCONTINUANCE AND OF ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

CONTINUANCE

Maintenance of the school plant. The school plant, heated by a gas furnace, has always required the services of a janitor. Unless the heating system were converted to another type system, the services of a janitor licensed to operate steam-pressure equipment would continue to be required. In the event that the plant should give way to a one teacher type of operation, the costs of maintenance would be charged against the elementary budget, whereas in the past such costs were split between the elementary and high school budgets. The costs of maintenance will become an acute problem for an elementary budget in the years ensuing, because the school plant has been in operation for forty years and will require extensive renovation within the next five years. It has been found by Holy and Davis, who made a study of the age of school buildings which had been recommended for replacement, that the average age of buildings which were replaced was 43.2 years and that the average age of buildings

recommended for replacement was 47.6 years.¹ Regardless of whether the school is continued or discontinued, the problem of maintenance will become acute; health and safety problems will become more serious as the school plant deteriorates.

Financial ability of District 8 to continue operation. Table VII shows the relative size of the school districts of Custer County. Among Custer County's twenty-four school districts, District 8 ranks twenty-second in size. In 1955 District 8 had a taxable valuation of \$258,139.00, which was little less than its peak valuation of \$282,907.00 in 1938, when it ranked fourth in district valuation in Custer County. The reason the valuation decreased is because of the exodus of business establishments from the area; the reason it decreased so little is because of more realistic appraisal of property by assessment action. District 8 valuation is slightly lowered by 1,020 acres of Taylor Grazing Land and by 5,240 acres of "Title 3" land, of which Taylor Grazing is non-taxable, and of which approximately 25 per cent of "Title 3" land returns tax revenues.² In other words, 3,930 acres of "Title 3" land plus 1,020 acres of Taylor Grazing land return no revenues directly. It can be seen, then, that 14.32

¹T. C. Holy, and H. H. Davis, "Method of Determining Expenditures Required to Maintain the Status Quo of School Plants," American School Board Journal, 74:45-46, June, 1927.

²Information obtained from the Custer County Agricultural Agent, Miles City, Montana, May, 1956.

TABLE VII

SIZE OF CUSTER COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICTS BY SECTIONS,
LENGTH AND WIDTH 1955

Districts	No. of sections	No. sections across at greatest width	No. of sections across at greatest length
1	106	13	10
2	66	9	8
3	152	15	12
8	54	6	9
9	437	18	36
11	175	18	10
12	78	6	13
13	116	16	8
14	306	22	22
16	393	23	21
25J	130	8	35
31	116	8	17
38J	60	12	7
42	76	18	5
43	78	12	7
52	137	15	12
61	64	9	8
62	40	6	8
63	269	21	16
76J	44	10	6
82	339	23	20
83	228	19	11
86	216	18	14
92	100	18	6
Total	3780		

SOURCE: County Superintendent of Schools, Custer County,
Montana. Data as of December 14, 1955.

per cent of District 8 land is essentially non-taxable. The financial ability of the district to raise additional revenues by special levy action is limited; a ten mill levy on \$258,139.00 amounts to \$2,581.39.00, a small amount to reckon against the rising costs of education.

The best estimation of the immediate financial capability of District 8 to support the continued operation of the high school for 1956-1957 was considered to be appraisal of the budgetary requirements for the ensuing school year compared with those for 1955-1956. Because the budget for District 8 was not considered until the fourth Monday in June, in accordance with School Laws,³ and since preliminary work was not done before then, the writer arrived at requirements by estimate. The budget for Ismay High School for 1955-1956 estimated expenditures at \$9,636.00. Total receipts from all sources were estimated at \$7,605.00, which left \$2031.00 to be voted by an additional tax levy, which, when finally passed by the voters, amounted to 7.9 mills. The significant difference in the receipts for 1956-1957 would be that an "ANB" (average number belonging) of nine students would result in \$4,050.00 as against \$5,850.00 for the thirteen students comprising the ANB for the year previous. Further, a 30 per cent increase without vote (of the \$4,050.00) would result in \$1,215.00, as against \$1,755.00 for the preceding year. Assuming that other receipts would not differ significantly, there would be

³
State Department of Public Instruction, Helena, Montana, School Laws of the State of Montana (Great Falls: Tribune Printing and Supply Co., 1953), p. 57.

\$2,340.00 less with which to operate the school for 1956-1957. The budget for 1955-1956 was pared to a minimum; it could not be cut further for 1956-1957. Therefore, the trustees would face three choices: (1) to discontinue operation, (2) to submit an additional tax of approximately 9.1 mills for vote, or (3) to use up the cash reserve of approximately \$1,500.00 and submit an additional tax of approximately 3.1 mills for vote. It would be questionable whether the electorate would sanction the higher levy.

The year ensuing has become the most critical one, financially, of any in the history of operation of the high school. For 1957-1958, the situation would improve because of larger expected enrollment (see Table III, page 36. As shown in Table III, the enrollment would have become so low in 1958-1958 and 1959-1960 that financial operation of the school would have become impossible.

The curriculum. The offering has been limited by the small enrollment, by the numbers of teachers employed (three), and by the financial ability of the district to provide varied courses. The small enrollment has resulted in limitation of the subject offering because of reduced demand for electives. In 1955-1956, the high school enrollment consisted of three boys and seven girls. One boy was in the ninth grade, one in the tenth, and one in the eleventh. Both scheduling and choice of electives are difficult for such a situation.

A factor which has resulted in broadening of objectives, but which has prevented further expansion, has been the school emphasis on commercial subjects such as shorthand, typewriting, and bookkeeping. While such emphasis was properly placed because of community pressure, it has prevented expansion into other areas because the two teachers other than the commercial teacher have had a full load in teaching required courses.

The curriculum in Ismay has become somewhat "academic," or "bookish." Inadequate funds to provide laboratory equipment and teaching aids have resulted in subject-centered courses. An attempt was made during 1955-1956 to provide by purchase and by repair needed equipment for laboratory work, but it was successful only to a limited degree. The school has always had a very fine audio-visual program; films from the State Film Library have been generously supplemented by those obtained from oil companies, railroads, and other such companies.

In 1955-1956, the curriculum included physical education, world-geography, general science, biology, American government, English, typewriting, bookkeeping, shorthand, algebra, and work in library and office-practice. Physical education was confined essentially to non-contact activities, because of low enrollment, isolation of the district, and because the physical education class was composed of both boys and girls in a mixed group. The school day began at nine o'clock in the morning and was divided into eight forty-five minute class periods, broken by a

one hour noon period, and ending at four o'clock in the afternoon.

During 1955-1956, the pupil-teacher ratio was 3.33 to 1; for 1956-1957, the expected ratio would be 5 to 1.

Legal aspects of continuance. Ismay High School's accreditation was dropped to "final probation" by the State Department of Public Instruction in July, 1956.⁴ If accreditation were denied, the school would be forced to discontinue because of denial of foundation revenues.⁵ The continued operation of Ismay High School could be permitted on the basis of approval of the county budget board and of the county superintendent of schools:

. . . before any high school having an ANB of twenty-four (24) or less may be approved as an isolated high school, the board of trustees of the district wherein said school is located shall, on or before the fifteenth day of June in each year, make written application to the budget board for such approval. . . .⁶

The School Laws prescribe the point at which accreditation will not be granted unless based upon the factor of isolation; however, the School Laws do not prescribe the minimum ANB necessary for operation within the range of approval based upon isolation. In Ismay's case, continuance has become dependent upon two factors: (1) favorable voting action upon additional tax levies; and (2) actions taken by the

⁴The Missoula Sentinel, June 16, 1956.

⁵State Department of Public Instruction, Helena, Montana, School Laws of the State of Montana (Great Falls: Tribune Printing and Supply Co., 1953), pp. 134-135.

⁶Ibid., p. 140.

trustees to insure continued operation, as the hiring of teachers and submission of the budget. It would appear that the board, by virtue of implied powers, could effect discontinuance by simply deciding that the school should not run.

II. DISCONTINUANCE

Legal aspects. The School Laws adequately describe methods and procedures for abandonment of school districts; nothing is said in the School Laws concerning the manner of effecting the discontinuance of a high school. As the result of such legal inadequacy, the trustees of District 8 have been placed in an embarrassing position between the insistent demands of those who want them to terminate the high school operation and the demands of those who insist upon continued operation. While the trustees have wanted to suspend operation, they have been uncertain of the consequences, especially since the School Laws require preparation and submission of a budget in June; requirement for submission of a budget implies necessity for continued operation.

Effects upon community life. Discontinuance would adversely affect the operation of small businesses in Ismay. A large proportion of teachers' salaries have been spent within the local community at the grocery store, the cafe, the telephone exchange, the post-office, the hotel, and the gasoline filling station. Since businesses are financially unattractive in Ismay at best, withdrawal of teacher-spending might hasten their

abandonment.

Effects upon the population. Discontinuance would probably result in further exodus of population from the area. Six family heads indicated when interviewed that they would move from Ismay if the high school were discontinued. The six families comprise a total of twenty-four persons. Of the six family heads, three work outside Ismay. One is a pensioner and would, as she told the writer, refuse to be separated from her son. One, with four children in school, of which three are in high school, said that he could not afford to "board out" the children, nor did he wish to be separated from them. The others gave rather vague reasons why they would leave. None of the six families have extensive property holdings in the area.

Effects upon the students. The effects of discontinuance on students would be somewhat a matter of speculation, except to the extent that two high school students indicated in May, 1956, that they would quit school if the high school were discontinued. In the long run, it is probable that some students would fail to continue their education or even to start in high school if local facilities were not available. The local school system has been for the child who has attended there the place where he was provided a friendly, home-like atmosphere, and one which was intimately connected with his home life. It would be a moot question whether the child could step into a somewhat foreign school system and

still feel the same sense of loyalty which he felt toward the home town school. A considerable amount of research has been done on the problems which have arisen from transportation of children from one school environment to another.⁷ "Boarding out" children in distant communities might result in anxieties, fears, and frustrations on the part of students. Further, "boarding out" would involve the question of whether proper parental or moral control would extend to the boy or girl removed from the home environment.

Effects upon the school as a center for community life. Carnivals, dances, and other social functions have been previously financed by student-activity funds raised by high school students. Such funds averaged between \$1,500.00 and \$2,500.00 for the years between 1950 and 1956, i.e., as intake. This amount of money, although varying, has provided amply for field trips, parties, and other extra and co-curricular activities necessary in a small school's educational program. However, once the source of revenue has been taken away, such activities could be continued only to a limited degree by the elementary school,

III. ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

Redistricting. The School Laws prescribe the methods by which

⁷For example, see Roy C. Buck, "School District Reorganization, Some Considerations for Sociological Research," The Journal of Educational Sociology, 28:25-29, September, 1954.

redistricting is effected.⁸ The data found in this study, however, have resulted in the conclusion that redistricting is impracticable. As shown in Figure I, page 14, Ismay is located within the triangle formed by the junction of Highway 10 with Highway 12 at Miles City. Ismay's closest connection with Highway 10 is via the Yellowstone Trail to Mildred, thence to Fallon, thence westward to Terry, or eastward to Glendive.

Geographically, Ismay is isolated. It is sixty miles from Miles City, thirty miles from Baker, in Fallon County, and sixteen miles from Plevna, in Fallon County. The Ash Creek School, a one teacher rural school, is located seven sections west thence one north of Ismay, or a distance of approximately eight miles by road. The road is impassible in wet weather; it is not maintained in the winter.

The Westmore School, in Fallon County, is located eight sections east, thence one south from Ismay, or a distance of approximately ten miles via the Yellowstone Trail. Like the Ash Creek road, the Yellowstone Trail is poorly maintained and impassible in wet weather. Further, Plevna Public School is more readily accessible over better roads from Westmore than is Ismay.

The Cottonwood School is located six sections south, thence six west from Ismay, south of Highway 12, or a distance of approximately eleven miles by road. The "Eleven Mile Road" to the Cottonwood School

⁸State Department of Public Instruction, Helena, Montana, School Laws of the State of Montana (Great Falls: Tribune Printing and Supply Company, 1953), pp. 67-69.

is the most impassible of any in wet weather and is seldom maintained in winter. Further, it is only fifteen miles from the Cottonwood School to Plevna, over the paved surface of Highway 12.

The combined rural school population of Ash Creek, Westmore, and Cottonwood will probably not exceed more than thirty pupils for the next several years. Approximately twenty-five of the thirty will attend the Westmore and Cottonwood rural schools; both schools have better access to Plevna than to Ismay. In other words, redistricting would serve no useful purpose; after 1958-1959, as shown in Table III, page 37, the District 8 high school population will have declined to the extent that a high school would serve little purpose in the area.

School-bus transportation of high school students to other schools.

If the high school were discontinued, the responsibility for providing transportation, including budgeting, would rest with the board of trustees of Custer County High School,⁹ except that permission for transportation could be granted an out of county board of trustees by the state superintendent of public instruction.¹⁰ Round trip daily transportation to Miles City would be impossible because of the distance involved. Because of poor roads to Ismay, lack of transportation equipment, and inadequate

⁹Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 123.

space availability, it is questionable whether transportation to Plevna or to Baker would be practical. After 1958-1959, the number of high school students in Ismay will have declined to the extent that an out of the way bus trip would have become more expensive than practical.

Payments to individuals in lieu of school-bus transportation. In the event of discontinuance, the Ismay parent would have two choices, either of which would appear logical: (1) to transport his children to Plevna (if Plevna had available space) and to seek reimbursement according to the School Laws,¹¹ or (2) to board out his children at Miles City or at Baker and to seek reimbursement under that clause in the School Laws which says:

In isolated cases where due to isolation pupils must live away from home to attend school or due to excessive distances, impassible roads or special circumstances where parents cannot transport their children, payments in accordance with the above schedule (which is the payment in lieu of transportation provided by the district) are inadequate and adherence to such schedule would subject the parents or guardians of a school child or the child himself to financial or physical hardship the schedule may be altered by the transportation committee subject to written approval by the state superintendent of public instruction; provided, that, in no case shall the altered schedule allow more than thirty dollars (\$30.00) per month for one child, twelve dollars (\$12.00) per month for the second child, and six dollars (\$6. 00) per month for each child in addition to two (2) from the same family. . .¹²

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 123-129.

¹² Ibid., p. 126.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has presented a descriptive analysis of the background factors affecting the growth and decline of the population of District 8. It has presented the cultural milieu in which the school and the community have come to exist as the result of population changes. It has shown how fewer landowners have come into possession of larger tracts of land and how they have moved from their lands into towns, becoming "suitcase" farmers.

District 8 was settled in over-anxious urgency by people deluded into thinking that the homesteaded 160 acres was a bargain which would produce an adequate living. For some, the dream held true. For others, the dream held true so long as the rainfall supported the farming structure. For most, the settlement venture ended in disaster, the result of ill-fated actions based upon over-enthusiasm, outrageous advertising, and woeful ignorance.

It took only nine years beginning in 1907 to build an impressive but tenuous social structure complete with a school, civic organizations, and local government. The organization of the population took place rapidly, but the planning was poor, confused, and hurried. From 1909, both the community and the school were caught up in a confused pattern of rapid settlement; from 1916 until the present, both were part of the

process of disintegration. Because of the impermanent nature of the social and economic structure, District 8 inhabitants have failed to develop loyalties such as might be expected in more stable areas.

After the population had been organized, the first period of uncertainty occurred between 1917 and 1920, when it was first felt that farming methods had been improperly devised to fit eastern Montana conditions.

In 1929, the depression, followed by drought in the 1930's, knocked the props from under the false farming structure which had been imported into the area from states eastward. For the school, the only stable time, notwithstanding population decline, was from 1936 until 1947. After 1947, because of continuing population decline, it became apparent that the high school was definitely on the way out unless some unforeseen circumstance halted the downward population trend.

The school population has declined in much the same manner as the district population, only much more erratically. It had become so small by 1956 that it was difficult not to fall back upon the easiest recommendation and one backed by research findings, that it is impracticable to operate a high school for a handful of students. Notwithstanding, it would seem advisable to continue operation of the high school as long as the local electorate supports the additional levies required for continuance.

Since 1952, the school has come to exist in a climate of mixed emotions and community cleavage, where one faction has insisted that the

high school is a "necessary burden" and the other faction has insisted that it should be discontinued. The data have seemed to indicate that the sharp factional vote on the additional levies which began in 1953 was inspired by leaders wishing to overthrow tax-supported education rather than by motives inspired by appraisal of educational needs in the community.

Conclusions and recommendations. Ismay High School should continue operation in 1956-1957 and through 1957-1958 if the State Department of Public Instruction grants accreditation. Operation should be discontinued with the end of the school year 1957-1958, because of apparent financial inability to continue. At that time it would be helpful if the trustees of District 8 would make known their intentions to discontinue operation of the high school. The State Department of Public Instruction could furnish necessary counselling to parents in the Ismay area concerning desirable alternative actions such as "boarding out" students or transporting students to other schools.

The State Department of Public Instruction could initiate action to provide a legal basis in the School Laws upon which district trustees could decide when a high school should be discontinued, and by what procedures it should be discontinued.

Finally, other eastern Montana school districts might have similar problems brought about by the decline of population. Very little research

has been done in the area explored by this study. Such research should be done before early settlement records have been obscured and before the old settlers have died.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW FORM

INTERVIEW FORM

Date of interview _____

Name of interviewer _____

Name of interviewed _____

QUESTIONS

1. When did you first come to this area, that is, in what year?
2. What were your reasons for coming here?
3. How did you come, by horse, train, or by some other means?
4. Did you get land under the Homestead Act?
If so, how much?
5. What was your first job here?
6. When you first came, how many families were there on each section?
7. When was Ismay founded?
8. How did Ismay get its name?
9. When did the railroad come through?
10. Was Ismay already a town when the railroad came through? If so, what was the population?
11. What effect did the railroad have on Ismay?
12. When did Highway 12 by-pass Ismay?
13. What effect did this have on Ismay?
14. What was the population of Ismay during these years? 1910 _____
1915 _____ 1920 _____ 1930 _____ 1940 _____
15. During what year was Ismay largest? What was the population? _____
16. What caused Ismay's population to decline?
17. In general, how does Ismay differ from its "boom" days?

APPENDIX B
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Ismay, Montana,
February 29, 1956.

Dear Mr.
Mrs.
Miss _____

QUESTIONNAIRE

I am writing a thesis so that I can complete my work in the field of education at Montana State University. As a thesis subject, I have chosen a local problem, that of the decline of population in School District 8, and the effect of such decline upon Ismay High School.

The foremost problem facing School District 8 is whether Ismay High School should be abandoned. At the present time it has an enrollment of ten, seven of whom are girls, and three of whom are boys. This enrollment is the lowest in the history of the school system.

Following is a table which shows the rapid decline of the Ismay High School population since 1950:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Average Number Belonging</u>
1950-1951	22
1951-1952	24
1952-1953	17
1953-1954	17
1954-1955	13
1955-1956	9*

* While ten are enrolled, the tenth student did not enroll in time to change the average number belonging from nine to ten.

Following is a table which shows present enrollment by grades and expected enrollment for 1956-1957:

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Present Enrollment</u>	<u>Expected Enrollment</u>
5	3	3
6	2	3
7	0	2
8	6	0
9	2	6
10	4	2
11	3	4
12	1	3

The above figures are based upon observation that the families who now have children attending Ismay Public School make up a fairly stable population. The above figures do not consider the possibility which exists that pupils now attending nearby rural schools might enroll at some future date in Ismay High School. From the above figures, it will be seen that Ismay High School enrollment for 1956-1957 will approximate fifteen; for 1957-1958, twelve; and for 1959-1960, ten.

Copies of this questionnaire have been mailed to every eligible voting member of School District 8. It is hoped that each will reply as soon as possible. Signatures are not required. The returned questionnaires will become the personal property of the undersigned and will never be shown to anyone. However, the data from each will be assembled and presented as collective information to the next regular meeting of the Board of Trustees, District 8, after which it will become public information.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that Ismay High School, District 8, should be abandoned immediately?

Yes _____

No _____

2. Do you believe that Ismay High School should be abandoned during a particular year?

Yes _____

No _____

If answer is "yes," name the year _____.

3. Do you believe that Ismay High School should be continued until it has become financially impossible to sustain its operation?

Yes _____

No _____

4. Make any comments you wish to make here:

Truly yours,

Roy N. Miller

APPENDIX C
COPY OF
BULLETIN FROM THE ISMAY COMMERCIAL CLUB

ISMAY, MONTANA, AN OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU¹

If you had visited Eastern Montana ten years ago and had not returned to it again until today you would note many changes. In 1910 Ismay lay in what might have been called the last great American frontier. A wave of immigration swept over this country like a tide. Men of all sorts and stations came to take up the land which the government so freely gave away! Many of them came with no intent to remain after they had received title to their homesteads. Many of them had had no experience in farming. Buildings were made temporary. The country bore all the ear-marks of a frontier, --of the American frontier which has pushed steadily westward ever since our hardy American pioneers first penetrated into the Indian land west of the Alleghenies.

The West is quite often thought of as a new, unsettled country. Perhaps we do not realize the accomplishments which have been made in the last ten years. Take our town of Ismay, for example. In place of the temporary shacks hurriedly put together to house the early settlers we now boast of modern homes with electric lights, with furnaces, with running water, with bath rooms and all the conveniences which make life pleasant. We have our churches, both Protestant and Catholic, our Altar Society, our Ladies Aid, and other women's organizations. We have our lodges of various orders. We have our rural telephones and mail routes. We have our high school, accredited in all parts and departments of the state university. Our business places have such equipment as you would expect to find in a well ordered eastern city. Graded roads have supplanted the winding prairie trails which the pioneer followed.

The town of Ismay is no longer a primitive settlement. It and the country about it have already passed to a stage of successful maturity.

When a man launches a business enterprise it is well that he should take stock of the obstacles in his path as well as the factors which operate in his favor. As a farming region Eastern Montana has much to commend it. As a farming region it also has unique problems due to its peculiar geography and climate.

First of all it must be borne in mind that Montana is a land of scant rainfall. Montana has suffered in the past from advertising which overlooked this fact. As we stated before, many settlers who had never had any experience in farming of any kind, came out here ten years ago for the sake of a free homestead. They and others tried farming as it is done in lands of greater rainfall. We do not say that all these men have been successful. Isolated cases are recorded where a man raised fifty

¹"Ismay, Montana, An Opportunity for You," Ismay Commercial Club, circa 1920.

bushels of wheat to the acre and was able to produce from two to three times the value of his farm in one year. Other men could be pointed out who have been very successful as wheat growers using the same methods as are used in the eastern states and yet we do not feel that the average production by such methods will justify taking a chance on that kind of farming. We believe that there has been evolved a peculiar kind of farming to fit conditions in Montana and to solve the problems due to our peculiar climate.

There is a great deal written of the so-called dry farming method. While we cannot go into great detail in a booklet of this length, yet the fundamental principle of the scheme can be explained in a sentence or two. The dry farmer plants half of his acreage each year. The other half he leaves fallow, keeping it well cultivated during the growing season to provide a surface mulch and to kill off all weeds. In this way he conserves the moisture of one season for use in the second.

Competent farmers who came to the Ismay country years ago and have given the dry farming method a fair trial are unanimous in declaring that it offers the best possible method of success.

Ten years ago a great deal was said about Montana as a wheat country. This was the central theme of a good deal of widespread, -- some of it misguided, -- advertising. Yet, so far as farming is concerned, we were then trying an unknown land. No one knew for certain just how profitable the wheat industry would be. For four consecutive years, the yield was excellent and it was assumed that this part of the United States would be the wheat belt of tomorrow. Later experience has caused men to revise this judgment somewhat, and today the prevailing opinion among the best of our farmers is that Montana is a land of corn, of hogs, and of dairy products, as well as a wheatland.

Consistent trial has shown that milk and butter can be produced here at a profit. Farmers hereabouts are building silos and buying high class dairy cows. The amount of cream sold at the Ismay stations shows a healthy increase, year after year. It has been said that the rancher gave way to the wheat farmer and the wheat farmer is now surrendering to the diversified farmer.

There are some advantages to Montana farming which cannot be found in any other part of the United States. First and foremost, consider the price of our land. The return from a farm should not be figured upon the number of bushels or produce to the acre, but it should be figured upon the returns for a given outlay of labor and money. A farm is, so far as financial profits are concerned, nothing more nor less than an investment. High priced land levies a heavy tax upon the worker.

If you have farmed upon land costing two hundred dollars or more the acre you know how interest charges may consume a year's profit. Land about Ismay is now selling between ten and twenty-five dollars the acre which is far below the value which its productiveness will finally place upon it.

The region about Ismay is level and rolling. Thousand acre fields are by no means uncommon. We are not scourged by noxious weeds. With plenty of horses a man can cultivate a greater surface area than in any part of the East where fields are small.

Montana life offers many advantages which belong to the West alone. Our climate is healthful and invigorating. Natural resources abound. The unfenced range is free to all. Coal is found in all our creek banks. All of the farms hereabouts are within short hauling distance of some one of these numerous coal mines where the farmer can spend a few days in the fall digging his annual supply of fuel at no cost to himself except the labor in taking it from the ground and hauling it home. Artesian water has been found in Ismay and in the country surrounding. There are four such wells within the city limits whose depth is between four hundred and six hundred feet. Farmers and ranchers who have sunk wells to that depth have not failed to strike flowing water. The Anderson ranch, six miles south of town, has a flowing well which is five hundred feet deep.

It must be remembered that the western pioneer days are over. Montana is now in a better way toward permanent prosperity than at any time in her history. We have profited by ten years of experiment. Men from a score of states have come here and lived through all the vicissitudes which every new country has to meet and thanks to these same men who have persisted, who have not lost hope in Montana as a farming state, we now have resident farmers who have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that Montana farming can be made to pay.

The town of Ismay is enclosed between the rimrock and the cottonwood flat on Fallon Creek, on the Yellowstone Trail, a trans-continental automobile highway, and upon the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad.