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2020 - The Flint Hills: Rooted In Stone (Larry Patton, editor)

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## One-Room Schools In Wabaunsee County

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### Recommended Citation

Patton, Vicki (2020). "One-Room Schools In Wabaunsee County," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2020/history/4>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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*Schoolhouse on Mill Creek Road*  
Dave Leiker

## ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS IN WABAUNSEE COUNTY

In 1854 some of the earliest white settlers in Wabaunsee County put down roots along Mill Creek in the county's north.

Times were tough and uncertain. Families had few resources, but Mill Creek valley was beautiful and full of promise. Children living in this valley began to meet for schooling in a log cabin before any school districts existed.

Two schools were officially organized in 1859, one in Wabaunsee Township and another along Mission Creek in eastern Wabaunsee County. By 1863, fifteen districts existed across the county with thirteen holding at least a three-month school term. The Wabaunsee County educational system was ahead of some counties in the state because of a taxation system for township needs, including local school district expenses.

In School District 1, Wabaunsee Township, the new settlers scrambled to build their homes before the winter of 1859, which proved to be a long, cold season of ice and snow. Their buildings included a 14' x 20' church where school was held on weekdays with the teacher, Miss M.H. Cotton, receiving a salary of eight dollars per month for a three-month term.

When Alma sought to become the county seat, citizens had to decide whether to build a new schoolhouse or a new courthouse and held school in the courtroom when court was not in session. Other schools utilized log cabins or homes in newly settled areas of the county until a school could be built.

A colony of Pennsylvanians in the southeast part of the county and New Englanders settling in the Wabaunsee Township area were primarily well educated. The New Englanders supplied many

of the teachers throughout the county, especially during the Civil War years. The central and west part of the county were mainly German immigrants who valued education. According to the biographies of these families, many were college educated prior to their emigration from Germany to America. Examples included a civil engineer from Polytechnical Institute, a priest, an individual educated at the University of Cologne, and another educated at Halverstadt Medical College in Prussia.

After the Kaw and the Potawatomi Indians were displaced from Wabaunsee County in 1868, multitudes of settlers flocked into the county. Log cabins, barns, houses, businesses, and schools were quickly constructed. Not all who came to Wabaunsee County understood the Flint Hills landscape, so many homesteads and schools located near the creek bottoms succumbed to the floods of the 1860s. On October 25, 1869, a devastating prairie fire roared into the county from the southwest and scorched a sixty-mile-wide swath of pasture across the county. The fire took its toll on many buildings, including schools. Many native stone schools were systematically built following the vengeance of this fire. Documents reveal that almost half of the ninety-one one-room school buildings in the county were made of native stone at one time or another.

These rural schools were bursting at the seams with students ranging in age from five to twenty-one. In 1882, fifty-two students were enrolled in Des Moines School. In 1885, “Miss Halderman’s school [district not named in the newspaper] wishes us to correct an error made in her school report last month. The attendance should have been 59 instead of 69.”

The population explosion in these communities meant teachers were in high demand, and the state attempted to quickly provide certified teachers. The first official path to teaching included completing eight years of schooling and passing a teacher examination. Later, summer or “teacher institutes” were required for teachers to maintain their teaching credentials. One teacher in Wabaunsee County took her first teacher examination at the age of sixteen and began teaching before she was seventeen.

Most one-room schools were ungraded until 1890, and children were not placed in a grade level. They were grouped according to ability, and the older students were mentors. By 1900, most schools were teaching grade-level curriculums. By 1903, the state of Kansas advanced rural education by also requiring school to be in session for five months, a two-month increase from the previous three-month term.

The size of a one-room school district was typically six square miles with the hope



School Distric 12, Wabaunsee County  
kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

that children would not have to walk over two miles to school. Wabaunsee County's roads, however, followed the paths of least resistance rather than square miles. Paths to school sometimes meant students crossed streams at low water fords and then climbed from the valley floor to follow an open trail across the flinty upland ridge. The Flint Hills terrain was sometimes challenging for those walking to school. "I didn't start to school until I was eight years old," a Mrs. Thomas reported. "There were three creeks to cross and my parents wouldn't let me go to school until I was big enough to cross the streams safely."

Before school began each year, the land around the building was often fenced to keep the cattle out and several furrows were plowed to protect the building from prairie fires. In September when grass grew as tall as six feet or higher, small children could get lost walking to school. The plow was used again to plow a path for the child to follow to and from school. No one got lost even with snow on the ground.

These one-room rural school buildings standing on the prairies were a symbol of the community's commitment to learning. These buildings also served as community centers for all the families nearby. Wabaunsee County newspapers reported school buildings being used for church and revival services, holiday parties, dances, quilting bees, literary and debate societies, singing schools, political meetings, box

suppers, picnic basket festivals, baseball games, and pie suppers.

Each one-room school had its own stories: teacher walked seven miles to and from school each day, teacher was locked in the coal shed, outhouse was tipped over on Halloween, students carried water to school when the well went bad, rattlesnake was shot by teacher, wet and muddy shoes dried by the coal stove, an outbreak of diphtheria closed the school, workup and "ante over" played at recess, memorizing and reciting, watering and feeding horses at noon, pounding the chalk dust out of erasers. Too many stories are forgotten, but those who attended these schools fondly recollect three things: the sense of family, relying on each other during the hard times, and community spirit and togetherness.

The Great Depression and the end of WWII were the beginnings of the decline of one-room schools. By 1950 the number of one-room Kansas schools plummeted from 9,200 to 3,000, and in the 1960s the last one-room school in Wabaunsee County closed. In 1990 Rolla, the last one-room school in Kansas, closed in southwest Kansas. Today, there are still over 400 one-room schools in existence operating in five states: Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, and California.

Vicki Patton is a teacher, librarian, and community historian who attended a one-room school.



*Lone Cedar School*  
Mark Feiden