
Andrew Gulliford's America's Country Schools is an ode to the 200,000 one-room schools in operation at the beginning of the twentieth century when they enrolled one half of the country's school children. As director of the Country School Legacy Project sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Gulliford with his staff searched the country for surviving one-room schoolhouses and for country school culture. They began in the states served by the MPLA and continued throughout the continental United States collecting and inspiring school building restoration projects all over the country.

It is the one-room schoolhouse itself, in all its forms, that is the protagonist of the book—be it white frame with the Greek Revival features that were a civic metaphor or constructed in the more vernacular log, sod, adobe, brick, or native stone. The strengths of this handsome book lie in its source material and its plan of action. The more than four hundred illustrations evoke a simpler era. The prescription for restoring decaying school buildings to be used for living history programs, museums, and community centers is complete. An adaptive use of a school by a bank in Norwalk, Connecticut, proved to be good business, Gulliford points out, as sentimental callers became bank customers. A state-by-state listing of nearly one thousand restored one-room schools includes buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In the section, “Country School Legacy,” Gulliford assesses the role of the one-room school in American education. He reveals it to be “a powerful cultural symbol” (p. 35) that was reflected even in such individual school names as Harmony, Apple Pie, and Good Intent. The country school stood for progress, for as Gulliford states, “A community with a school was a community with a future” (p. 160).

Using oral histories, letters, diaries, reminiscences, and school textbooks as sources, Gulliford describes school culture. He also examines realistically the role of country schools in assimilating new Americans, pointing out that cultural assimilation was the goal and that little effort was made to honor native cultures of immigrant families or of Native Americans.

It is in defining the nature of the country school, however, that its true meaning must be sought. A country school reaches
in every visitor an inner core that lies deeper than nostalgia. Why do these one-room schools retain such universal appeal? At their best they served students with creative teaching that utilized every possible community resource, perhaps best described by Julia Weber Gordon in *My Country School Diary* (1946). At their worst one-room schools were taught by teachers who were still children and could do little more than emphasize rote learning. Surely no one wants to return to the days when children were shoeless and serious diseases were passed via the common dipper or when mathematics was arithmetic, science was nature identification, and social studies virtually nonexistent.

The one-room school represented a high tide of local control. The little school was one certainty affirming that everyone would be rewarded for the hard work and honest values taught therein. As the power of economic cycles and the forces of the world mar-
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ket brought doubts to the idea of progress, the psychic need for the country school to protect basic cultural beliefs became a necessity. Populism, which sprang from the same roots as did the country school, failed because it lacked a world view. It is no coincidence that the educational reform of school consolidation followed the uncertainties brought on by economic depression and came at the beginnings of world conflict. Upon entering a restored one-room school today, who is not comforted by a momentary return to a belief that if you learn to read, write, spell, cipher, and, above all, follow the precepts of the country school, you can regain control over your own future?

Gulliford’s celebration of the country school will be relished by readers for its enthusiasm, charm, thoroughness, and inspiration.

University of Massachusetts, Polly Welts Kaufman


Taking as his prescript a quotation from Woodrow Wilson (“The history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large.”), Geoffrey Blodgett, a historian on the Oberlin College faculty, has prepared a useful primer and personal guide to the Ohio town and college more famous for its ideas—perfectionism, coeducation, and racial equity—than for its buildings. In a series of brief but lively vignettes of some 130 structures built between 1837 and 1977, the author surveys the history of an important midwestern environment, concentrating first on the experimental, avant-garde, largely twentieth century campus followed by, and in contrast to, the traditional, plain style, mostly nineteenth century ambience of the village.

Blodgett’s verbal sketches are drawn with precision and wit. Fin-de-siècle eclecticism is characterized as “the grand march of the stone elephants”; the International Style is dubbed “the age of Important Architectural Statements.” His real estate and neighborhood history is well grounded in local census, income tax, and newspaper records. Only the miniscule (2” x 3”), often dark, photographs that accompany the sketches disappoint the reader interested in comparing verbal interpretation and visual evidence.

In addition to being a compact architectural history, the book represents a personal and professional odyssey of a kind experi-