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THE SCHOOLS OF TARKINGTON PRAIRIE

by Sonia Calloway

Social transformation of the rural world in the twentieth century was unmistakable in America's small towns and countryside. Agrarian populations shifted toward towns as urbanization spread throughout the country following World War I when industrial and technological innovations changed the workplace and lifestyles of Americans. Social and economic conditions born of the Great Depression and World War II forever changed the face of rural America when farming became big business and factories lured farm workers with the promise of steady incomes. The increase in large farms and the exodus of agricultural workers to towns and cities caused many small farmers to declare bankruptcy and be displaced from their homes. The former agrarian society characterized by close family ties and strong community interaction valued continuity over change and viewed the rural school as the primary agent of that continuity. However, forces of change threatened the existence of the rural school in the twentieth century.

The School Reform Movement, a national campaign started early in the 1900s, sought to transform schools using big business models with cost efficiency as the primary goal. Reformers alleged that rural school systems were inefficient and unproductive, yet rural communities viewed local schooling as holistic, indefinable, qualitative, and difficult to quantify. The rural school was a symbol of a community identity and an organizational center that unified residents. Many rural communities in America lost their identities to these forces of change. This paper examines a rural Texas school district founded on rural peoples' extreme personal commitment to educating their children and the manner in which they strengthened the symbol of their community despite twentieth-century social transformation.

About fifty miles north of Houston and fifteen miles west of the Trinity River lies Tarkington Prairie. Education on Tarkington Prairie started in the pioneers' homes and developed into a locally governed, multi-building complex comprising the backbone of the community, which in 1997 encompassed 238 square miles in Liberty County with a population of 7,223. The pioneering spirit was present at the educational beginning and has persisted.³

Detesting the frigid winters of Indiana, Burton B. Tarkington departed that state with his wife and infant daughter early in the summer of 1821. Traveling south with only necessities and two horses, they arrived at a Trinity River encampment in the Mexican state of *Coahuila y Texas* in the spring of 1822. Tarkington, assisted by an Indian guide, embarked on a scouting expedition that led to the discovery and settlement of the Prairie in the East Texas wilderness. The Tarkington family became the first white settlers within fifteen miles of the west bank of the Trinity River, but by 1834 forty pioneer families from Indiana had joined them.⁴ The settlers' pioneering spirit,

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dominated by independence, self-reliance, and creativity, contributed to the importance of education on the Prairie. Although they shared many goals, their pioneering spirit led to conflicts relating to school locations and consolidation. The Prairie people were determined to build a strong community of good roads, good churches, and good schools. Proud of their community, many Tarkington Prairie residents worked diligently to provide their children with the best educational facilities available.⁵

In the 1830s, the settlers' primary concern was survival. With land to clear, homes to build, and crops to plant, there was little time for a formal education in the first decades of settlement. Education was a secondary concern. It was common practice in the first half of the nineteenth century for pioneer families to educate their children at home. Nevertheless, records indicate Burton Tarkington was instrumental in establishing the first school on Tarkington Prairie by the mid-1850s. The name of the school and date it opened are obscure.⁶ A neighborhood school located in the Oak Shade Community was probably the first Tarkington school. The autobiography of Rev. D. W. Jackson reported that he accepted a teaching assignment at Oak Shade School in May 1857. Burton Tarkington's election as Liberty County commissioner in 1854 coincided with the establishment of a centralized state school system supervised by a state superintendent for public instruction. Although this is not solid proof that Oak Shade School was the first Tarkington school, it is the first school named in available records.⁷

There were no free public schools in the area during the 1800s. Parents purchased textbooks from, and paid tuition directly to, the teacher. Community residents constructed, maintained, and repaired schoolhouses. Students brought their lunches and drank water drawn from a well. They attended school at varying intervals based on the need to work family crops. The usually brief school term lasted as long as funds were available.⁸

A frequent location for the neighborhood schools on the Prairie consisted of clusters of trees, locally referred to as "islands." These clusters grew at a slightly higher elevation than the surrounding lands, and during downpours water commonly covered the low-lying areas, creating the appearance of islands on the Prairie. Some of the neighborhood schools bore such names as Gum Island, Jett Island, and Box Island.

Many early schools in Texas were one-room log buildings or local churches. Records describe the original Oak Shade School building on Tarkington Prairie as a sixteen by eighteen-foot, one-room log school with a wood stove for heat and no windows. The first high school on the Prairie, Oakdale High School, met in the Rural Shade Baptist Church. The opening date of this school is not known. Other schools on the Prairie were simple, one-room frame buildings that could be expanded as the student population increased. Jackson opened a school, a frame structure resembling a house more than a school building, on the far southwest side of the Prairie on January 20, 1858. The similar one-room frame building of East Tarkington School was built in 1896 on land donated by Prairie residents. A side room was added

when the student enrollment outgrew the original building.11

In the first decade of the twentieth century, some communities departed from the frame structures for school buildings and erected brick or concrete schools. The Hightower Community constructed a two-story brick building in 1913. East Tarkington School District outgrew its two-room schoolhouse and passed a \$40,000 bond issue to build a modern, two-story concrete building. The new school served as a community center, a polling place for local and national elections, a singing school during summer vacation, and a place for Sunday school, church services, and weddings. The old schoolhouse was converted to "teacherages," or housing for the teachers of the district.¹²

Most early schools of this area were neighborhood schools. Transportation was limited to riding animals or walking in all types of weather over dirt roads. Many students lived three or more miles away, so several pupils boarded with friends or relatives who lived closer. As the student population increased, some schools closed while new ones opened to maintain the neighborhood school concept.¹³ Some of the neighborhood schools were Dolen, Davis Hill, Lamb, Little Flock, Rayburn, and Big Creek – evidence of the commitment of Prairie residents to education.¹⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, the neighborhood schools underwent organizational changes at the hands of the Liberty County Commissioners Court (LCCC) and, later, the Liberty County Board of Education (LCBE). Economic pressures contributed to some schools consolidating with others. Later, the Texas School Law Grouping Plan (1927) and the Dormant School Law (1930) forced consolidation of most Prairie schools in 1931 to create the Tarkington Consolidated School District (TCSD).¹⁵

The Liberty County Commissioner's Court appointed the Liberty County Board of Education on July 10, 1911, to oversee schools in the county. Within a year, the LCBE recommended consolidation of the East and West Tarkington Districts. The LCBE later abandoned this position, but directed West Tarkington School to relocate in September 1912. The trustees and patrons of West Tarkington School adamantly opposed the directive, but appeals and arguments were to no avail. In January 1913, the district moved the schoolhouse as directed.¹⁶

In November 1927, the LCBE summoned the trustees of all Common School Districts to discuss reducing five districts to three. Trustees from East, West, and North Tarkington were the only ones to appear, and they all opposed consolidation. The LCBE recommended circulating election petitions calling for a consolidation election in each of the three districts. The remaining LCBE minutes through August 1929 are not legible. Either the petitions were not circulated and elections not held, or the consolidation elections failed. However, consolidation would remain an issue on the Prairie. For rural parents, consolidation meant moving at least one school from the convenient proximity of their homes, and they stood firm in opposition to school consolidation.¹⁷

Ironically, as consolidation brought students from different neighborhood schools together, it also contributed to tearing the community apart. Following the consolidation of Prairie schools required by the 1927 Texas School Law Section 353, Rural High School Grouping Plan, the LCBE located the new high school on the former North Tarkington School site as directed by the Texas State Department of Education. The location issue was troublesome because various community groups wanted the school located on "their site." It divided the community, pitted families against each other, forced the resignation of a local school board trustee, and split the local school board. According to one resident, members of the community carried six-shooters due to the hostilities created by the controversy. The same resident stated that his father's family lived only a short distance away, but shunned relatives for years following the controversy because they were on different sides of the issue. 19

According to one Prairie resident, many of the "old timers" continued to harbor resentment over the school location issue. He contends that members of the former common school districts were unaware that consolidation would eliminate classes in their respective school buildings, fueling controversy and consequently leading community members to lobby for the new school to be located "in their backyard," much as the neighborhood schools had been. The community infighting discouraged Dolen Common School District from participating in the planned consolidation at that time.²⁰

The TCSD issued \$40,000 schoolhouse bonds in September 1931 for construction of the new school building, but community members remained unhappy. A lengthy round of heated appeals, hearings, and lawsuits ensued as the two community factions joined the divided local school board in the school location battle.²¹ Much of what transpired following the appeals remains unknown. Eventually the divided local school board agreed on a school site and dropped litigation. The school was built on Duncan's Corner during the 1932-1933 school year and the first classes met in the fall of 1933.²²

On March 24, 1933, the *Cleveland Advocate* announced completion of the high school. The paper described the one-story brick building as "one of the most modern of its kind" to accommodate students of the former common school districts. In May 1934, the high school received full accreditation as a four-year school. Prairie residents disagreed over the high school site but pulled together in their support of education to approve a bond issue and build a new high school to which a second building was added within a year. Then disaster struck.²³ The original school building completed in March 1933 burned during the summer of 1936 or 1937. The state fire marshal determined that arson caused the fire. The *Cleveland Advocate* contained no articles about the fire in the summer of 1936 or 1937 and no one was charged in the incident.²⁴

A sense of community cooperation settled on the Prairie following the disputed school location and subsequent fire. The Prairie pioneering spirit and enthusiasm for education again became evident as residents set about erecting

temporary buildings to house students for fall classes. They would not let a schoolhouse fire diminish their efforts to have an educational program in place on the Prairie. By 1938, bonds were issued for a new brick school building. ²⁵ The Tarkington school buildings in 1947 consisted of a one-story frame structure for the grade school, a one-story frame agricultural building, and the rebuilt brick high school. By 1950, the district had added a small frame band hall, a tin athletic field house, a brick homemaking building, and a brick cafeteria building. ²⁶

The Gilmer-Akin Law of 1949 created additional financial pressures for common school districts throughout Texas by imposing uniform standards of curriculum, length of school year, minimum class size, and teacher salary minimums. The expense of meeting the uniform standards caused many common school districts to consolidate with neighboring independent school districts (ISD). Many people on the Prairie did not want to consolidate with Cleveland ISD located ten miles away, because they had worked diligently to preserve education on the Prairie for their children.²⁷

In 1954, Ralph Byers, former superintendent of Tarkington School District, encouraged residents to vote for independent status, which would allow the district to control local taxation and operations. According to Byers, property tax limits and valuations in the consolidated school district contributed to its financial difficulties. The district's operating expenses created a financial deficit year after year. Forced consolidation with another independent school district was a real possibility if these circumstances continued. Some community members opposed independence because they believed their property taxes would increase substantially. On May 15, 1954, residents voted two-to-one for independent status, thus creating Tarkington Independent School District (Tarkington ISD). The election highlighted the development of community unity and the continued importance of education on the Prairie.²⁸ In May 1957, Dolen Common School District merged with Tarkington ISD and expanded Tarkington's district boundaries.²⁹

Tarkington ISD continued building programs to expand educational opportunities for Prairie children. The district contemplated ways to meet the increasing student population. Continuing growth within the community and racial integration of TISD in September 1965 compounded the classroom shortage. Between 1958 and 1967 the district added a new high school, a teacherage, a superintendent's home, a high school wing and library, and a portable classroom.¹⁰

TISD board members called a bond election for March 30, 1968, to fund more building construction. The election offered three propositions and all failed when approximately fifty-seven percent of the voters rejected the proposals. The district set another bond election less than a month later, which also failed by a resounding sixty-five percent. In June 1968, the superintendent resigned and the school board hired a replacement the following month. The situation required a building program based on careful study and planning. On August 19, 1968, board members discussed the best method of informing

district patrons of school needs. The discussion led to a committee to study the requirements of the schools and help inform district residents.³²

The strategy of including district taxpayers in evaluating district needs brought the community closer. Woodrow Scott, a committee member, related that when the committee surveyed the school buildings the members reported that "the elementary school was not fit for students to be in." The voters of the district overwhelmingly approved four bond issues totaling over \$4.4 million between 1969 and 1979. This resulted in a new high school, elementary school, and additional classrooms at all campuses. The Prairie people willingly accepted the largest tax increase to date in their attempt to provide the best educational opportunities for their children. More than sixty acres were purchased between 1967 and 1979 for building and transportation purposes.³³

This bond activity included construction of a new 85,500-square-foot high school. The bid was awarded in July 1973, the same year an all-time record 106 inches of rain fell on the Prairie. Construction slowed and the high school's construction site became reminiscent of the early neighborhood "island" schools as water surrounded the site. A local newspaper announced the grand opening of the new high school in a special edition on September 19, 1975. The special edition contained six pages of articles about the school with congratulations from several area businesses for Tarkington ISD's progressive attitude and action in building such an educational facility. Several illustrations throughout the newspaper displayed important features of the school.

Septic system problems plagued the first elementary building program. In March 1973, construction began on a sewage treatment plant that was subject to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approval and funded through a federal grant. The district received ninety percent of the federal grant monies in June 1975 and underwent an EPA on-site inspection in July 1975. Board minutes omit the results of the inspection but operation of the sewage treatment plant continues today.³⁶

Budgeted allowances and short-term loans provided for additional building projects, remodeling, repairs, and equipment replacements during 1984 and 1985. Four classrooms were added to the high school and two to the junior high school as the Prairie population and student enrollment increased.³⁷

The district's energy costs escalated due to the greater number of buildings and the increase in fuel costs. The board members received information at the March 27, 1986 board meeting concerning a co-generation plant designed to save an estimated fifteen percent in utility costs per year. The TISD school board signed agreements totaling \$444,000 to finance and maintain the co-generation project, with a construction start date of June 1, 1987. The plant became operational in January 1988, but early in the 1990s, failure to convert the plant engines from diesel to natural gas forced TISD to buy electricity again.¹⁸

The TISD school board explored additional ways to finance continuing repairs, remodeling, and construction of district buildings to provide

educational facilities for Tarkington Prairie students, but a \$1.75 million bond proposal to remodel the junior high school and add classrooms to the elementary school was defeated in 1989 and again in 1990.³⁹

The TISD school board continues to meet district building needs through creative financing options such as budgeting construction costs, short-term low-interest loans, and lease/purchase agreements. The district has implemented cost-cutting measures to meet building needs, including acting as its own building projects contractor and utilizing district personnel to perform some construction work, which has saved approximately twenty percent on construction expenses. Over \$1.3 million budgeted in 1997-98 added a new wing, library renovation, and a new roof at the high school; a new cafeteria and band hall renovations to the junior high; and additional classrooms to the elementary school. When questioned about future financing for the district's building programs, the superintendent indicated no plans for bond programs in the near future.*

The Prairie residents' rugged pioneering spirit and individualism contributed to the growth of the district's educational building program. They not only fought for new building programs and bond issues to fund them, but from 1931 to 1988 residents also donated more than forty acres to the district. Land was not the only property residents donated – they also donated their time and skills. Although the Prairie residents gave willingly of themselves, they also solicited support from the nearby town of Cleveland and beyond. Businesses from Cleveland to Houston supplied items such as cars for driver education classes, a truck for the agriculture department, a sports track, a football scoreboard, baseball field fencing, a truck for district use, and a radio base station with twenty-five radios for transportation department use.

Student organizations supplied items ranging from board member nameplates to raising funds for stone benches at the elementary school and a junior high school marquee. Other student organizations served the community and school by removing trash on the school road, conducting a book drive to help start a community library, spearheading food drives to feed the needy, and giving blood during annual blood drives. Following the example of their parents, students endorsed the Prairie pioneer concept of a strong community with good schools.⁴³

Tarkington ISD is known as a progressive school district. The district's facilities have improved dramatically from the original log building, but modern facilities are not all that make a school progressive. Tarkington Prairie has no town of its own, yet it covers more area than several small towns. In the middle of 238 square miles is a school district that serves several communities with racial diversity, different socio-economic groups, and a variety of religious denominations. The area has limited business and industrial facilities, so many Prairie residents commute to Houston to work. Tarkington Prairie has one common bond: its schools. The area is known for, and relies upon, the growth and achievements of the students of Tarkington Independent School District.

Perseverance, hard work, dedication, determination, understanding, disagreements, and compromises all played a part in the development of the Tarkington Independent School District. At the start of the twenty-first century, Tarkington Prairie residents remain convinced that good schools are essential to a strong community. They share a commitment to educate the Prairie children by providing the best educational opportunities possible.

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