

New Hampshire's one-room schools

BY JANET THOMSON

janet@janetrthomson.com

The Bedford Historical Society hosted Steve Taylor's "New Hampshire's One-Room Rural Schools: The Romance and the Reality" on Wednesday, April 10, at the Bedford Town Hall. Taylor is an independent scholar, farmer, journalist, longtime public official and the product of a one-room school.

In the early 19th century, one-room schools were the backbone of primary education for children in New Hampshire. While living in Plainfield, Taylor attended the Tracy School, a one-room school located in Cornish. He describes it as a marvelous institution, consisting of students from first to eighth grades. According to Taylor, it was organized to give each student some responsibilities. For example, the eighth-grade girls would help the second-graders with their numbers, and the seventh-graders helped the first-graders with their ABCs. Even the boys were charged with keeping the fire going and fetching water, a practice that was not uncommon during this time.

The Grange Movement in New Hampshire at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century was the biggest



Janet Thomson Photo

Steve Taylor presented a program about one-room schools at Town Hall. The presentation was sponsored by the Bedford Historical Society.

influence on the educational structure of schools in New Hampshire, said Taylor. The Grange is directly responsible for the establishment of the University of New Hampshire at Durham; the creation of the New Hampshire State Police, and the electrification of rural New Hampshire, which led to the creation of the New Hampshire Electric Cooperative. However, their biggest focus was education.

Taylor believes that because women were admitted as full equal members in the Grange and could head any chapter, education in New Hampshire

flourished. He also noted that New Hampshire was a half-century ahead of the suffrage movement, making this an innovative and radical posturing at the forefront of public policy development in New Hampshire.

Taylor's talk focused primarily on the period from 1880 to about 1920, what he considers the peak of the one-room school's influence and its decline. Although the romance of the one-room school is based on some truth and myths, it's an expression of an amazing democratic ideal, said Taylor. New Hampshire believed that everybody should have a basic education fostering the first law mandating that towns provide for primary education.

He describes one-room schools as intimate and by today's standards progressive, even innovative in the way they harnessed the talents of the older kids to bring the younger ones along. In other words, one-room schools were a place of community.

Although one-room schools appeared to work during the 19th century, the reality is that there were enormous challenges, said Taylor.

Because schools were decentralized, the state didn't pay much attention to what

was being taught or how long schools had to stay open during the year. However, an even bigger problem began to emerge when the population in rural New Hampshire started to decline, leaving an over strength of too many one-room schools and not enough tax revenue. Taylor said that this was directly linked to the end of the Civil War and agricultural prosperity.

Consolidation of schools and resources became the ideal solution for rural New Hampshire. Many of these schools closed for the winter because they didn't have the funding to keep students warm. When the legislature mandated that all schools meet for 22 weeks, it caused problems for those children living on the hillside because they had no way to get to the schools in town. To meet this demand, the Legislature allocated public funds to hire somebody to transport kids, thus, beginning bussing in the state.

According to Taylor, there're three one-room schools left in New Hampshire - The Red School located in Croydon; the Blue School in Landaff, and a school in New Hampton that was built in 1940, and claims to be the youngest one-room school in New Hampshire.