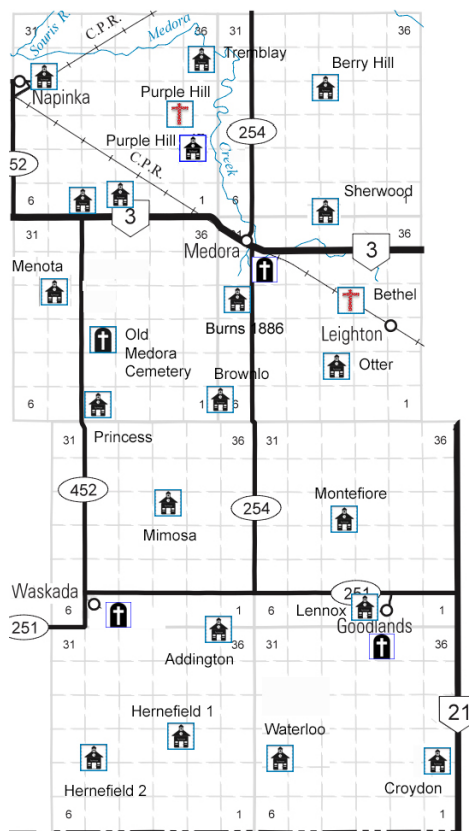


How was it? Attending a one-room country school? Rural kids, these days, use buses, parents' cars or even their own car to get to school. It may be difficult to imagine going to a small rural school, only a few miles from home, attended only by neighbour kids.

In **my** day, we only went to town once a week. We certainly did not drive to town just to go to school. Imagine, then, being born 50 or 60 years even earlier, in 1900, when prairie folks traveled by foot or horse. Everything essential, including school, needed to be close by.



When the young government of Canada surveyed the prairies, a few acres were set aside every 5 miles or so for a school yard. Each yard was expected to have a ball diamond, flag pole, swings and teeter-totter. A horse stable was added if the teacher or some students traveled by horse. The schoolroom had desks, blackboards, a pencil sharpener and a world map. Early schools were heated with wood. Older students were expected to start a fire on cold mornings so the room was warm for the 9 am bell.

Early settlers were practical about the location of their school. An effort was made to ensure the school was more or less central to the children. If the surveyed site didn't suit the population, the school was moved so as to make it as easy as possible for as many students as possible. Some schools were moved a number of times.

In Brenda Municipality, the first school was built in 1884. Over the next 10 years, the number jumped to 15 rural schools. But, change kept happening. By 1920, farm families were having fewer children. So schools began to consolidate. Causing families to travel farther to deliver children to school. Eventually, the only school in the Municipality was in Waskada.

By 1967, when I was in grade 6, every rural school was closed in favour of busing students to town. That was hard for some of us. Imagine, growing up with a large garden. With our own meat, eggs and dairy. We were always close to home. Suddenly, it seemed, my rural school was closed and we had to bus to town every day. It was a massive culture shock.

We went from a playground of 15 neighbour kids to one with 150 strangers. The provincial government argued that we would get a better education in town. I'm not sure. My childhood country school was ideally located beside a ravine with trees, a creek, animals and wild fruit. On special days we'd pile into parents' cars to visit other rural schools, for three legged races and ball games. The older students in the room offered role modeling. And we offered the same to younger ones.

Perhaps most memorable was watching the whole community squeeze into the school for a well rehearsed and rousing Christmas concert. Complete with Santa Clause (who looked suspiciously like Uncle Peter). Our country schools were central to our communities. Through consolidation, yes, our worlds got larger, more complex. But, necessarily, our communities got smaller.

Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.