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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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O. J. KERN  
COUNTRY SCHOOL EDUCATOR

By Robert Lindvall

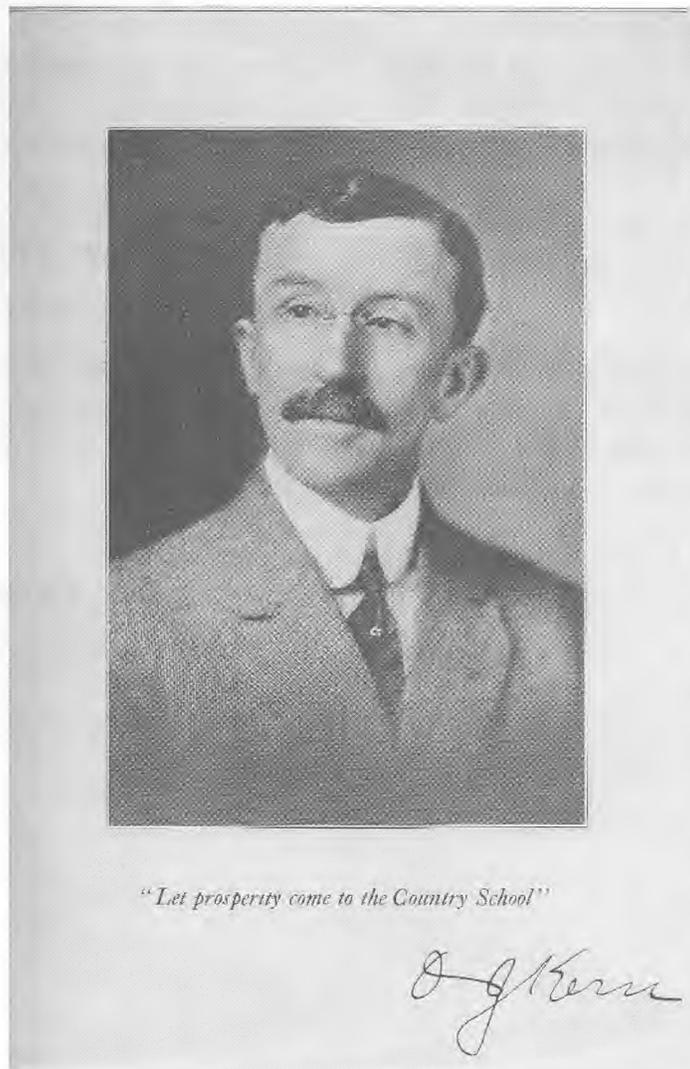


Photo of O.J. Kern  
Photo from the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago  
County 1902 - 1915.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Robert Lindvall has been an attorney in Rockford for over thirty years with the last twenty-four years as the research attorney for the judges of the 17th Judicial circuit. He has studied local history for the last fifty years and has published several articles in the *Nuggets of History* as well as other local publications. Further, he has recently co-authored a centennial history of the Winnebago County Bar Association and authored in 1987 a history of the court system in Winnebago County.

Robert has been on the boards of several local historical societies, including the Rockford Historical Society. With retirement coming in the next five years he is looking forward to future history projects in his areas of interest: Rockford, Harlem Township, Winnebago County, Swedish-American, and the Augustana Synod of the Lutheran Church.

When not working at his employment or studying local history the wonder of nature and the natural sciences help to relax and broaden his enjoyment of life.

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

# O. J. KERN COUNTRY SCHOOL EDUCATOR

By Robert Lindvall

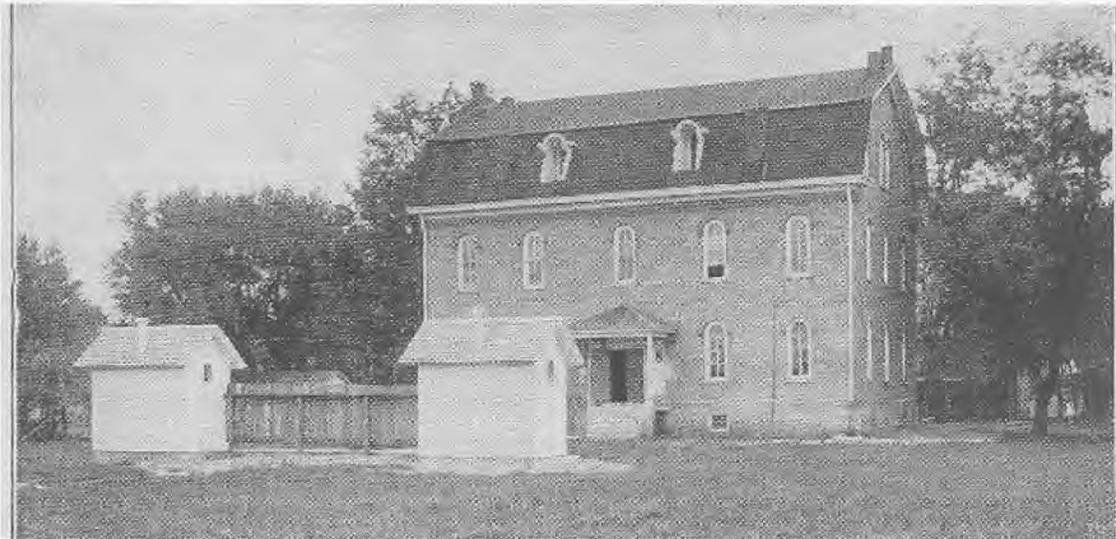
*"Thou shalt enrich and enlarge the life of the Country Child"*  
O J. Kern *Among Country Schools* (1906)

This education creed was a one sentence statement of the childhood and lifework of Olly Jasper (O.J.) Kern the Superintendent of Schools of Winnebago County. Rural life was the career of O.J. (most references to Kern used his initials), the son of John A. and Elizabeth A. (Ameutrou) Kern who was born January 1, 1861 on a farm in Moultrie County near Manton Illinois. Beside the valuable lessons he learned from a childhood on the farm, O.J. attended and graduated from the county schools of Moultrie County. This was followed by four years (1884-88) at nearby DePauw College in Green Castle, Indiana. It is reported that while attending DePauw for four years he did had to leave school before graduating because of poor eyesight.

With this background O.J. in 1888 garnered a position as principal for the four-room common school in Cherry Valley, Illinois. For the next three years O.J. would continue his work in Cherry Valley. While at Cherry Valley School, O.J., on August 6, 1889 married Jesse C. Allen of Green Castle. After his time at Cherry Valley O.J. continued his career as an educator for seven years (1891-98) as a teacher at Rockford High School, the town where he and his family settled in the Highland neighborhood. In 1894 a fine school building was erected and attended by his children; Ester Allen b.1891, twins Evan Sherwood b. 1895, Louise Allen b. 1895, and Russell Allen b.1899. The home in the Highland neighborhood was at 216 Paris Ave.

While at Rockford High School O.J. continued to educate himself on the improvement of the education of the country child. This work prepared him to run for the position of Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County in 1898. That position had been filled since 1882 by Charles J. Kinnie, a career politician. O.J.'s 1898 campaign was favorably supported by the local press. The Rockford Daily Register Gazette during the campaign gave words of praise after a campaign speech in his former place of employment, Cherry Valley:

There is little doubt but that his address on the public school, its relation to the state and the great factor it is in the life of the republic was one of the best addresses ever delivered in this part of the state. Prof. Kern is thoroughly informed on all branches of the subject and for the address he made special research. Many facts and figures were presented which gave to the hearer a new idea of the magnitude and far reaching usefulness of the public school. Prof. Kern made earnest appeal for the schoolwork of the county and admonished voters to guard the institution whenever any question affecting it was up at the polls.

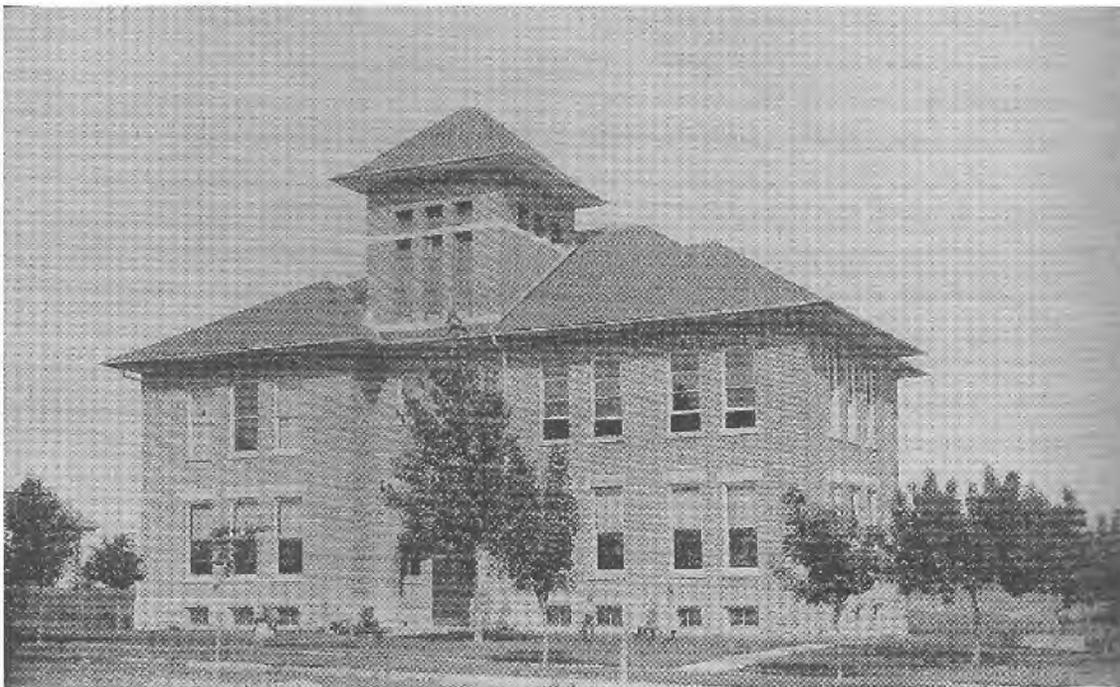


Cherry Valley Common School District #112

Photo from the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.

It is to be remembered that two national movements were moving through the nation at the time O.J. was superintendent; "The Country Life Movement" and the "Progressive Movement" (the later lead by the Lafollette family of neighboring Wisconsin). Both of these movements O. J. moved in step with during his career. To advance and promote these movements in Winnebago County, the nation, and the world, O.J. engaged in two informational formats. The first was annual reports of the achievements of the county schools in Winnebago County. The second was the publication of his first book, *Among County Schools*. The annual reports are rare items to find

today but at the time the reports were sent around the world to promote educational improvements. They were 50 to 75 page documents with many photographs. The reports would both goad and praise the local school directors for the way the schools implemented the improvements O.J. encouraged the directors to adopt.



Highland School

Photo from the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.

These reports served as the basis for *Among Country Schools* in which he detailed the improvements and advancements needed in the county schools to educate children in country life. *The Rights of the Country Child* was succinctly stated in the creed quoted at the beginning of this article. The start of the enlargement began before entering the school with *Outdoor Art: Beautifying School Grounds* evidenced for example by the plans for the school grounds of Shirley Common School District 120 in Cherry Valley Township. These plans were developed by J.C. Blair of the Department of Horticulture of the University of Illinois School of Agriculture. The developments of the School Directors would be faithfully reported each annual report. Some reports chided the advances by the school directors and other

reports praised the accomplishments of the directors of the same schools that were chided the year before.

The school grounds were also a learning post where several schools planted vegetable and flower *School Gardens*. Some would have the boys compete against the girls during the year and then at the end of the year all the schools competed against the other schools for the Lincoln Centenary (starting in 1909) Garden Traveling Trophy. Another teaching tool has been images. Images have been used since the beginning of time the only part to changes is the technology used to produce the images. O.J. availed the schools of this learning method by the use of *Indoor Art and Decorations*. The schools were lined with frame portraits of Washington and Lincoln and then on a rotating basis an exhibit of fine art would be at a school with an evening lecture and social for the total farm community to enjoy fine art.

To expand the selection of books in the collections of the School Libraries the schools, at the encouragement of O.J., joined in traveling library collections. The several collections would be housed in specially built cases and travel a set route for a set period of time before the full collection moved to the net school and new set of books came in. The anticipation was high for the students when it neared the date for the new books to arrive, especially for the student who had read all of the collection about to be moved.

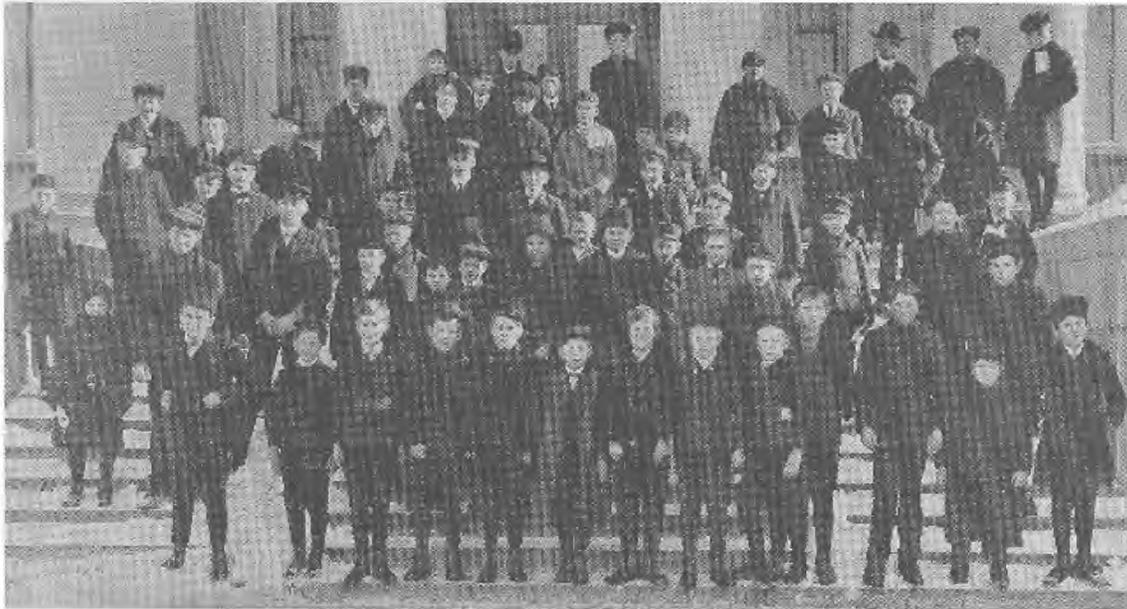
To foster his desire to advance farm methods, O.J. established in Winnebago county *A Boy's Experiment Club*, which was a forerunner to the 4-H Clubs of America. It garnered Kern installation to the National 4-H Hall of Fame or as stated in the Hall of Fame Internet site:

"Kern worked with the Illinois Agricultural Experimental Station to spread the word about new seed corn varieties. He organized the Farm boys Experiment Club in 1905, in cooperation with the agricultural college. These were a forerunner of 4-H clubs, designed to transfer agriculture technology to farmers through youth.

"Why not a course of training in the country school for the country boy which shall teach him more about the country life around him? Along with his study of the kangaroo and cockatoo, why not study the animals on the farm and a proper feeding standard for them?" - Kern's thinking led to the Farm Boys Experiment Clubs, a forerunner of 4-H clubs."

The boys also made yearly *Educational Excursions to the College of Agriculture* in Champaign (University of Illinois) and Madison (University of Wisconsin). [One may wonder if these were the beginning of the local nomenclature of a "field trip"]. This club movement did not only benefit the boys. At the same time the boys joined their fathers and neighbors at yearly *Farmer's Institutes* which filled the rooms of Memorial hall in Rockford with exhibits of locally grown crops such as hundred of ears of corn displayed throughout the hall.

The means to enact all of these achievements in the education of the county child were possible only by the improvement in the *Financial Phase of the County School Problem*. A full article could be written of this improvement by the taxpayer concern about the education of their children, but one simple example would be the increase in the tuition paid by the individual common school districts to Rockford High School for country students to attend high school. The total tuition paid by all the districts increased from \$1655.61 in 1899 to \$4436.65 in 1911 and came to a grand total of \$39,696.11 for the thirteen-year period.



Boy's Experimental Club Institute Memorial Hall Rockford

Photo from the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.

The crowning achievement of O.J.'s fifteen years as superintendent was *Consolidation* of the common school districts into larger districts. These consolidations merged several one room schools into larger (although still small) schools. It began with Seward in (1903) then Harlem (1910), New Milford (1914), Kishwaukee (1915), followed by Winnebago (1920), then Rockton (1920), Burritt (1920), Argyle (1921), and Harrison (1925). Another thing that changed the picture of the common school was the Community Unit High school, which maintained the common school for the first eight years of education, followed by the transfer to a high school after a county wide eighth grade graduation exercise in Rockford. The first community unit districts were Hononegah, Durand, Pecatonica, and South Beloit, all founded in 1920.

Two final changes supported by Kern were *Teacher Institutes* held at Memorial hall for the teachers, many with little formal training, and the development of *Manual Training* in the country schools which made for creative use of the one room school buildings common at this time.

The efforts of O.J. for the enlargement and enrichment of the education of the country child did not go unnoticed. Beside his book he wrote several articles for educational journals, and was often a speaker at state, national and international meetings dealing with country school education issues. The work of the people to establish the Seward Consolidated District received an award at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. This was highlighted in the annual report for that year. When it came time for reelection, this Progressive Republican received overwhelming support in his reelection bids in 1902, 1908, and 1912.



### Harlem Consolidated School District #122

Photo from the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.

An educator of the stature of O.J. was bound to be recognized beyond the local region. This recognition resulted in his resignation as superintendent in 1913 upon his appointment to the faculty of the University of California at Berkley. Kern would remain at Berkley until his retirement in 1930. Besides teaching, O.J. continued with his writing of books including a book on gardening at school locations and *Outline of Course Study in Agricultural Nature Study for the Rural Schools of California* (1923). Further, Kern published several articles in educational journals on these topics and lectured world wide on the same issues. The work of O. J. Kern merited the inclusion of him in the *Who's Who in Education*, beside other awards for his achievements in the field of education.



Bright Promise for Tomorrow Child in Marsh Common School District #58

Photo from the *Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.*

As far as the lasting effects of the advancements in the country schools in Winnebago County, the programs and ideas begun in the county with the guidance and encouragement of O.J. were continued by his first two successors, Abby Jewett Craig (1913-1929) and Irving Pearson (1929-1938). The next Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County was Paul S. Conklin (1938-1958). He gave leadership to the education of the country child which narrowed the number of remaining common school districts greatly, leaving only a hand full of districts mainly in the suburban area of Rockford by the end of the 1950's. This vast change in the common school in Winnebago County was covered in 1968 by then Superintendent of Schools Charles Espy, but the topic is one that future local historians should revisit.

Another topic for future historians is the sea change in the country schools of Winnebago County brought about first by the dissolution of Protectorate District # 211 in the 1960's and second by the dismantling of the local schools overseen by the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Needless to say the enrichment and enlargement of the life of the country child is today in no way that which O.J. Kern so ably crafted in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the children of Winnebago County.

## SOURCES

*Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Schools for Winnebago County 1902 - 1915.*

Various issues of the *Rockford Daily Register Gazette*.

*Among Country Schools* by O. J. Kern (1906).

*Census of 1910 for Winnebago County.*

*Winnebago County Birth Index.*

*Who Was Who in American Education*

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