



The development of the Montana common school system, 1864-1884
by Dale Raymond Tash

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of the Montana common school system during the formative period, 1864-1884, in order to better understand the problems facing the Montana schools today.

In investigating the territorial period of Montana schools the problem resolved itself into answering the following questions: (1) What affect did politics have on the establishment of the early Montana schools? (2) Did Montana's first school law, passed in 1865, fail to provide a foundation for the development of the territorial common school system? (3) What steps led to the passage of the 1872 school law and what were the provisions of the law? (4) How did the 1872 school law work in operation? (5) What factors influenced instruction in the territorial classrooms? (6) What were some of the factors influencing educational development in frontier Montana? Diaries, journals, personal papers, newspapers, House and Senate Journals, Session Laws, reports of national and territorial educational officers and United States government documents were analyzed to discover the answers to the preceding questions® The study was limited by available time and sources to an examination of the public common schools offering courses in grades one to eight between 1864, when the Organic Act was passed which made Montana a territory, and 1884, when a statehood convention was held® In investigating the development of the school system during the period 186U-188U the following conclusions were reached; 1. The most important legislative action concerning the schools was the passage of the 1872 school law, called "The Foundation Rock" of the common school system.

2. One factor influencing the retardation of school growth during the 1864-1872 period was the excessive political partisanship practiced by both Republicans and Democrats.

3. Other factors more significant than politics in explaining the slow growth of the schools in early territorial Montana included a sparse and unstable population, an unsteady and inadequate financial base of school support, citizen apathy toward educational development and isolation of the territory from the rest of the United States® 4. The common schools were established in Montana not only as a result of frontier interest in a democratic system of education but also because of such economic motives as the desire to encourage immigration and the belief that a good school system would help to keep the resident population from leaving fo other gold fields®

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DALE RAYMOND TASH

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Approved:

Earl N Kings
Head, Major Department

Willford Franks
Chairman, Examining Committee

A Goering
Graduate Dean

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of the Montana common school system during the formative period, 1864-1884, in order to better understand the problems facing the Montana schools today. In investigating the territorial period of Montana schools the problem resolved itself into answering the following questions: (1) What affect did politics have on the establishment of the early Montana schools? (2) Did Montana's first school law, passed in 1865, fail to provide a foundation for the development of the territorial common school system? (3) What steps led to the passage of the 1872 school law and what were the provisions of the law? (4) How did the 1872 school law work in operation? (5) What factors influenced instruction in the territorial classrooms? (6) What were some of the factors influencing educational development in frontier Montana? Diaries, journals, personal papers, newspapers, House and Senate Journals, Session Laws, reports of national and territorial educational officers and United States government documents were analyzed to discover the answers to the preceding questions.

The study was limited by available time and sources to an examination of the public common schools offering courses in grades one to eight between 1864, when the Organic Act was passed which made Montana a territory, and 1884, when a statehood convention was held.

In investigating the development of the school system during the period 1864-1884 the following conclusions were reached:

1. The most important legislative action concerning the schools was the passage of the 1872 school law, called "The Foundation Rock" of the common school system.

2. One factor influencing the retardation of school growth during the 1864-1872 period was the excessive political partisanship practiced by both Republicans and Democrats.

3. Other factors more significant than politics in explaining the slow growth of the schools in early territorial Montana included a sparse and unstable population, an unsteady and inadequate financial base of school support, citizen apathy toward educational development and isolation of the territory from the rest of the United States.

4. The common schools were established in Montana not only as a result of frontier interest in a democratic system of education but also because of such economic motives as the desire to encourage immigration and the belief that a good school system would help to keep the resident population from leaving for other gold fields.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A physician can be a good physician and a scientist an effective scientist without knowing much about the history of their professions. The frontiers of scientific and medicinal knowledge are so rapidly expanding that there is little time for looking back. Yet, as author William Medlin has said, a prime characteristic of outstanding men in the applied as well as in the theoretical sciences is that they seek to understand the evolution of their disciplines.¹

The importance of knowing the history of ones' discipline is equally true for people in the field of education. It is important to study the history of education in order to be able to understand the educational problems of today. The history of education enables the educational worker to detect fads and frills in whatever form they may appear, and it serves as a necessary preliminary to educational reform. Author Edgar Knight has discussed the preceding reasons for studying the history of education in his book Education in the United States.² This writer has believed, as does author Knight, that in order to understand the problems of Montana's educational system today it is necessary to understand the historical background of this system.

¹ William Medlin, The History of Educational Ideas in the West, p. v.

² Edgar Knight, Education in the United States, p. 38.

Statement of the Problem

Although innumerable books and magazine articles have been written on Montana history, authors have concentrated on Indians, politics, road-agents, mines and transportation. The history of the Montana schools has been neglected. In investigating the territorial period of Montana history the problem resolved itself into answering the following questions: (1) What effect did politics have on the establishment of the early Montana schools? (2) Did Montana's first school law, passed in 1865, fail to provide a foundation for the development of the territorial common school system? (3) What steps led to the passage of the 1872 school law and what were the provisions of the law? (4) How did the 1872 school law work in operation? (5) What were the attitudes of school leaders toward school questions? (6) What were some of the factors influencing education in frontier Montana? The chief purpose of this study was to investigate the history of the early development of the Montana common school system during the formative period, 1864-1884, in order to discover the answers to the preceding questions.

Procedures

To investigate the history of the development of the common school system in Montana during the years 1864-1884, the following procedures were used.

An examination of the diaries, journals and other personal papers

of Montana's educational and political leaders during the territorial period was made to determine the attitude of these leaders toward the various stages of development of the common schools in Montana, and to determine the effect of politics upon the progress of the common schools.

Newspapers, personal papers of the participants, House and Senate Journals of the territorial legislature, Session Laws and reports of both territorial and national education officers were analyzed to determine whether or not Montana's first school law, passed in 1865, failed to provide an adequate foundation for Montana's common school system. The same records were also utilized in investigating the 1865 school law in operation, which was necessary in order to discover if the law failed.

Newspapers, personal papers, microfilmed and printed copies of United States Government documents, House and Senate Journals, Session Laws, and reports of the various territorial and national educational officers were examined to determine the steps which led to the passage of the 1872 school law and to investigate the law's provisions.

In addition to the preceding sources, minutes of the various teachers' meetings and teachers' institutes were examined to ascertain how the 1872 school law worked in operation and what the attitudes of teachers and educational leaders were toward school questions under the system which was established by the law.

Limitations

Certain limitations were placed upon the study. They are given in

the following paragraphs.

The study was limited by time and sources to an examination of the development of the common school system in Montana territory between the years 1864 and 1884, the formative period in the history of Montana schools. Montana's history begins in 1864 when the Organic Act was passed which separated Montana from Idaho Territory. A Constitutional convention leading toward statehood was held in Helena, Montana in 1884, and although the United States Congress turned down the request made by this constitutional convention for admittance into the Union, most Montana citizens believed that statehood was but a matter of a short period of time. As a consequence of this expectance toward admittance into the Union, the common school system merely "marked time" from 1884 until 1889, when Montana was finally admitted into the Union. Educational leaders evidently believed that during the last years of territorial existence the school system should not be tampered with and that correction of any major defects in the common school system's legal organization should be postponed until after statehood, when new school laws would have to be passed by the state legislatures.

This study was limited by time and sources to an examination of the schools that were supported by public education. Private schools were brought into the discussion only when they threw light upon the development of the publicly supported schools. The history of Montana's private schools has been better covered than the history of the public schools by such authors as Palladino and Mills. Father Palladino discussed the development of the Catholic schools in Montana, and Reverend Edward L. Mills told the story of

Protestant school efforts in Montana.³

This study was limited by time and sources to an examination of the common schools that offered courses in grades one through eight. High schools and colleges were brought into the discussion of the development of the common schools only because the interest shown by the public in high schools and colleges was sometimes indicative of interest in all schools.

Although not a limitation placed upon this study, an inherent limitation resulted from the absence of studies related to this problem. Some of the general histories of Montana give an overview of the development of the Montana school system and some of the specialized histories of Montana describe the establishment and activities of particular schools in specific areas. Riley discussed the passage of school legislation that effected the development of state control over the educational system in Montana, but ignored the questions of how and why the various laws were passed and how the schools operated under the laws.⁴ Previous to this study there had been no attempt to pull together all of the parts that make up the story of the territorial school system. All available evidence indicated that many of the primary sources had never been used before.

Within the limitations expressed in the preceding paragraphs, then,

³ Lawrence Ralladino, Indian and White in the Northwest: A History of Catholicity in Montana; 1831 to 1891. Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Wick-ersham Publishing Company, 1922.

Edward L. Mills, Plains, Peaks and Pioneers: Eighty Years of Methodism in Montana. Portland: Binford's and Mort, 1947.

⁴ Emmett J. Riley, Development of the Montana State Educational Organization, 1864-1930. Washington: Catholic University of America, 1931.

an attempt has been made to investigate the early development of the common school system in the territory of Montana, during the years 1864-1884. In order to understand the development of Montana's common school system some of the basic factors that effected that development are presented next.

CHAPTER II

SOME FACTORS INFLUENCING EDUCATION IN FRONTIER MONTANA: 1864-1884

In examining the achievements of Montana pioneers in the field of education six factors were found to be in operation: (1) the idea of public-supported schools was still comparatively new and on trial throughout all of the United States, (2) Montana's common school system was established by territorial government, and territorial government was federal government, (3) the federal government was dominated by the Republican Party which used the territories to further Republican ends, (4) one result of the Republican Party's use of the territories was patronage, called "carpetbagging" by the citizens of the territories, (5) the aims of both national and territorial Republican and Democratic parties were partly determined by Civil War loyalties - long after the war to be Republican was to be pro-Union and to be Democratic was to be pro-southern and, (6) the democratic influence of the frontier affected the development of the Montana school system. These six factors which influenced educational development in territorial Montana are presented in the following sections.

The Public School on Trial: Montana Territory and the Nation

One must remember that during the period 1864-1884 the entire public school idea was still on trial throughout the United States, and many people believed that it had been proved a failure. Richard Grant White

was shaking the very foundations of the system by his criticism, and James G. Blaine was worried enough to propose a constitutional amendment against sectarianism in the public schools. Montana's common school system was established in the shadow of this national inquiry concerning the effectiveness of the public schools and must be judged accordingly. In comparing the status of Montana's schools after 1872 in the field of finance, number of teachers, and percentage of scholars taught, it was found that Montana always ranked high in the list of all the territories and states. For example, the per capita expenditure for schools in Montana was highest of all the territories and sixth highest of all the territories and states in 1876. The common school idea was on trial throughout America and not just in Montana. During the period 1864-1884 Montana school development compared favorably with school development in the other territories and states. It must also be realized that Montana's common school system was established by a territorial government, and territorial government was but a division of federal government. In the next section some of the effects of federal control over the territories is discussed.

A Federally Dominated Montana Territory: 1864-1884

The federal government was established in accordance with democratic theory. A guiding principle of this theory of democracy was that all representatives who administered the government for the people should be chosen by the people. The Montana territorial government was established by the federal government and yet the people of the territory had nothing to

say about the selection of their governing officers. All territorial officers were appointed by the president upon the recommendation of influential persons in the dominant political party.

Much of the political history of the territories evolved from what the citizens of the territories considered an "unwarranted interference" from Washington, the inability to select their own governing officers.¹ The citizens of those territories organized after the Civil War were more critical of territorial government than the inhabitants of the territories that had been organized prior to 1861. Before the Civil War the sectional division over slavery magnified all local territorial politics into issues of national importance. Since local politics and government were so important to the federal government, Washington exercised great care in the selection of territorial officers, and the people of the territories were governed by men of great ability and national prestige. Consequently, territorial resistance to federal appointment of territorial officers was much less before the War than after the War.

With the inauguration of Lincoln the position of the territories in the national scheme changed. The territory became a means of achieving Republican ends of nationalism, railroad building and homesteading. Of equal importance in Republican thinking was the possibility of patronage to be gained from the Federal offices; the army posts, the Indian agencies, and the post offices. Lamar claimed that the "patronage aspect, more than anything else, determined the relationship of territory and federal government

¹ Howard Roberts Lamar, Dakota Territory, 1861-1889, p. 17.

