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Anger, Boycott, Secession — A Clash Of Perspectives: The Closing of a High School in an Appalachian County

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ABSTRACT This research investigates the closing of a small, rural community school. Even though the community waged a tenacious effort to save their school, it closed anyway. Today, in its place, sits a new, private, community school. This research focuses on the dynamics of that drama. The research design consists of multiple levels of interviews (personal, telephone and focus group), archival reviews of local newspapers, and analysis of video tapes of the monthly meetings of the local school board. Additionally, the community shared with the researcher large boxes of confidential legal documents used in the court proceedings against the county. The findings of this research reveal several key issues. First, the county seems to have been determined to close the school at any social cost even without any identifiable, empirical, objective data analysis of the effects of the closing. Second, the community was equally determined to keep the school open. Third, the actors on each side of the issue appear to have been driven by subjective, symbolic representations of the other almost to the point where their decision making capacity was held captive by this process.

During the early 1990s a small, rural high school in an Appalachian county was closed. Certainly that, in itself, might not be newsworthy, but this school and this community were different. While many, if not most, communities protest a school closing in their midst, this community did much more. It protested, and boycotted, and protested again. When nothing seemed to bring about their desires, the community filed a lawsuit to override the local school board. Subsequent defeat on that front led to a ballot initiative to secede from the county. After failing in that effort, the community eventually

purchased the former school property and then reopened the closed school as a private school. All along the way, the community could have accepted defeat and gone on, but it refused to do so. This research seeks to understand why the community reacted as it did. While it is impossible to reduce the motivation of the community to just one factor, it appears that the most likely explanation for the community's action is connected to their symbolic representation of the county school board.

What We Already Know

While this analysis of a community conflict centers around the decision to close a local school, its roots lie in a much deeper and long-running disagreement over the meaning of community and the essence of community identity. To understand this dispute, it is essential to disentangle the various issues raised in the debate. Perhaps the most critical issue is how school consolidation, which has become a national trend, becomes a flashpoint for a community's struggle to control its identity and how the community fights to control its own destiny against powerful forces outside of its field of influence.

Beginning with the literature about rural schools, DeYoung (1995) points out that academic discussions typically take one of two approaches. The first and the dominant one details the inadequacies of rural schools. Conant (1959) first postulated the now popular notion that small high schools could not sufficiently prepare students for college because of inadequate course offerings and inadequate lab facilities. Tyack (1974) suggested that the best solution to the "problem" of rural schools was to consolidate them as has been done in city school systems. Within this approach, the most powerful justification for consolidation is often based on an ideology that emphasizes cost savings. Such savings usually include items such as reducing staffing needs, reduced building maintenance and utility expenses and enhanced efficiency in procurement procedures (DeYoung 1995). In contrast to these supposed cost savings, proponents of small, rural high schools argue that while some cost savings may be real, the consolidation advocates often underestimate the increased transportation costs and building costs associated with

the increased number of students (Sher and Tompkins 1977). Most of the research associated with this approach uses comparative, statistical methodologies not anecdotal information.

The second, though less mentioned approach, champions the cause of small, rural schools as the last vestiges of community (Peshkin 1982; Hollingshead 1975; West 1945). Advocates of this position for keeping small, rural high schools open often focus on the advantages of the high levels of community support for the school and the centering of many community social activities around the activities of the school. Langdon (2000) points out that small-school events often bring the community together, including adults who have no children in the school. All of these studies investigate school consolidations in relatively stable, rural agricultural communities in the Midwest and utilize exclusively anecdotal information in their methodologies. Unfortunately, there are no comparable studies to the ones in the Midwest in the literature regarding the schools in Appalachia.

Several recent examples of strategies to avoid consolidation in California, Illinois, and Arkansas reveal tremendous sympathy and concern about the potential loss of the sense of community when schools are closed (Benton 1992; Pearch and Liesse 1992). In Kentucky rarely has the consolidation of a local school been without problems in recent years. For example, 100 students and parents protested the closing of the 93-pupil Sycamore School in Pike County. In Ohio County, parents obtained a court restraining order to prevent the county from closing a school. Repeated protests in Harlan County enabled parents to keep the Holmes Mill School (a school of about 60 students) open for several years after the county announced the need for its closure. In Breckinridge County, attempts to close one of the elementary schools were abandoned after 4 years of protests (Louisville Courier Journal 1996a, 1996b). Clearly, a concern for a sense of identity with the local community as well as a fear about the impersonal nature associated with consolidated schools, continue to dominate the thinking of local citizens whenever a rural, small high school is about to be closed. In these approaches, looking for the “cause” of the closing of a school has not been the chief focus of the research. In particular, the research has failed to explore how each group defines or interprets the perspective of each other. Additionally, the research has failed to assess the influence of long-standing

relationships in shaping the decision-making process. This research attempts to fill these gaps.

Since this county is located in the Appalachian Region of Kentucky, the literature related to schools in the region is also important. Most of the literature concerning Appalachian schools tends to focus on settlement schools and private schools and their social purposes (e.g. Whisnant 1983), indigenous cultural components which could be incorporated into the typical curriculum (e.g. Wigginton 1985) or issues surrounding the deficiencies of schools in the region (e.g., Branscome 1970). While there are a number of ethnographic studies of specific Appalachian schools (e.g., DeYoun, 1995; Hartford 1977; and Schaeffer 1980), few are based on rigorous academic comparisons. All of these studies utilize anecdotal information exclusively and none deal with the issues raised in this research which is a community's refusal to lose its school. While the need to address school deficiencies is important, it may be more important to investigate the sociocultural importance of locality-based schools which is not addressed in the previous research.

The literature concerning symbols and how those symbols contribute to stereotypes of Appalachia also contribute to this research. Shapiro (1978) and Whisnant (1983) provide some of the seminal academic work regarding the creation and use of Appalachian stereotypes. From the initial depiction of the region by the local color writers of the 1870s to the contemporary times of the *Li'l Abner* cartoon and the "Dog Patch Trading Store" in London, Kentucky, Appalachia has been described as a region of lazy, backward people.

Hollywood and the popular magazines have perpetuated the power of stereotypes far more than has the academic community. Examples include the 1958 Harper's magazine article (Votaw 1958) entitled "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," the 1960s television series *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and more recently Robert Schenkkan's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Kentucky Cycle* (Schenkkan 1995), and the just released *American Hollow* (Kennedy 1999) by Rory Kennedy. There can be no doubt that the symbols and stereotypes employed against the people of the region continue to influence the discourse about the Appalachia. At the same time, these stereotypes can guide the discourse of communities which straddle the Appalachian/ non-Appalachian line. In this study, the influence of Appalachian stereotypes appear to contribute tremendously to the concern of the

people who live just outside what they perceive as the Appalachian boundary.

Finally, Symbolic Interactionism provides a clear theoretical framework for this research (see Meade 1956 for initial work in this area). Blummer writes:

The term, “symbolic interactionism” refers ... to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or “define” each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their response is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. (1939:79)

Blummer (1969) emphasizes the critical importance of the subjective element in any social interaction. This subjective element indicates that any interpretation of a social act within society at the objective level only would leave unanswered much of the rationale behind the particular action.

The “Thomas Theorem” in symbolic interactionism states that if a situation is defined as real, then it has real consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). This explains that the human environment is more than an objective reality. Rather, it is as an ongoing subjective effort by which people construct their reality and the meanings of that reality. Berger and Luckman point out the importance of common-sense knowledge:

Commonsense “knowledge” rather than “ideas” must be the central focus [for understanding reality] ... It is precisely this “knowledge” that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which so society could exist. (1966:25)

Charon (1998) emphasizes how human beings create and re-create their social worlds. This process becomes critical in understanding how individuals act in specific situations. Verburg (1994) discovered how such defining provided the legitimizing

mechanisms for the creation and continual existence of a mountain mission. In this fashion, social realities are seen as “something that happens rather than something that is” (Stryker 1980:128). In other words, subjective, constructed criteria are often much more important than objective facts in trying to arrive at some conclusion about social reality. Once a definition of reality is achieved, it then becomes a part of the taken-for-granted knowledge commonly know as “common sense” which no longer needs a connection with some objective reality. With such a connection, people “operate semiautomatically without any further reflection” (Verburg, 1994: 101).

Research Design

An interpretative framework from the literature bases can be developed to understand the circumstances that arose in this conflict. Clearly, the analyses of rural schools and previous consolidation efforts give insights into the expected direction the closing of the Tollesboro school would follow. The rationale for the discussion of consolidation and the steps in which that discussion would proceed can also be anticipated on the basis of the literature. Symbolic Interaction provides a solid, interpretative mechanism for understanding how symbolic representation of sociocultural factors impact on decision-making. Collectively these literature bases allow the researcher to understand the people, events, and the decisions surrounding the closing of the school.

Since there is a broad array of information and opinions about what exactly happened in the community of the closed school and what is the meaning of those events, several methods are utilized in this research. Personal interviews both with advocates of keeping the school open and advocates for consolidation were conducted in Fall 1999 and the following winter and spring. One focus group interview was held with several of the teachers and the administrators of the new school. Telephone interviews were conducted with some of the former and present pastors of the community. All of the interviewees (except the former school superintendent at the time of the closing of the school who was very reluctant to answer questions) refused to discuss the matter unless their identity was concealed. Therefore, all of the names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their

privacy.

While no representative sample of the population of the two communities was attempted in this research, all of the interviewees normally function as spokespersons for their respective region of the county. The interviewees come from both public and private sections of the communities. All are regularly engaged in community-wide discussions and forums which allow them to receive regular input from community residents. Finally, the pastors were in a unique position to gauge community sentiment as this drama unfolded both within their community as well as within their respective churches.

Archival review of the local newspapers in Mason and Lewis counties provided insight into community thinking through “Letters to the Editors” and a column called “The Comment Line” where people’s comments are printed in the next edition of the paper without any identification of the caller. In addition, copies of most of the documents used in the legal challenge as well as the background data gathered in that action were made available to this research. Video tapes of the final county school board meetings that culminated in the decision to consolidate were reviewed, and finally, five personal visits to the community of the closed school and the county seat were made. One visit was made to both the new school and the consolidated county school. Two visits were made to become acquainted with the community and its businesses and social institutions. One visit was made touring the entire county to familiarize the researcher with the different regions of the county and their general social characteristics.

Cassette recordings of each interview were transcribed and analyzed according to accepted qualitative research methods (Huberman and Miles 1994) looking for content specifics and similarities, word associations, and thematic consistencies. Many of the interview participants were asked the same questions in order to triangulate the results and thus gain further validity of the information. Unfortunately, a meeting with all of the involved school board members could not be arranged. Based on conversations with some of the county officials (such as the local newspaper editor, county board superintendent’s secretary and county judge executive), it seems reasonable to assume that the school board members did not want to revisit their decision. Such a meeting would have provided valuable insight into their understanding of the events and the rationale behind their decisions but they refused to enter into this undertaking.

Findings

Description of the County

Lewis County is a rural county (population about 13,000) located along the Ohio river in Northeast Kentucky with Vanceburg as the county seat (population about 1,700). It is included as an “Appalachian” county in the political definition of the region and shares many of the region's socioeconomic characteristics. The county as a whole has a declining industrial and commercial base and a virtually stagnant economic output with the highest unemployment rates of any county in the state (Commonwealth of Kentucky 2000). Alice Lloyd College which sees its mission as providing quality education for “Appalachia” considers Lewis county as part of their service area (conversation with Director of Admission at Alice Lloyd College, September 1999). There are four distinct population areas in the county with three population centers: Vanceburg, Tollesboro, Garrison and the “back country.” Each area is defined by a specific watershed which in the early settlement days not only served as a geographic boundary that greatly hindered travel but also enabled each area to become rather independent of the others. This separation continues today with each area having vastly different shopping and commercial patterns (conversation with a retired community leader, November 1999). Topographically, Tollesboro is distinct from the rest of the county by virtue of it's large flat spaces and a few rolling hills while the rest of the county is composed of steep hills and mountains. The following table summarizes these areas.

1990 Census Data

The 1990 Census Data (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990) for the two regions of the county (Tollesboro and Vanceburg) gives a good profile of the demographics of these regions. While there are some slight differences such as the value of owner-occupied housing units and the percentage of owner-occupied housing units, the overall picture of these two areas of the county is remarkably similar. The follow table summarizes this data.

Table 1: DESCRIPTION OF THE TWO REGIONS

Tollesboro

- * Settled by people from Fauquier County, Virginia
- * Initial settlers brought slaves and became successful farmers.
- * During the Civil War, substantial sympathy for the Southern Cause
- * Most of the commercial patterns are oriented towards Maysville in the west
- * Never incorporated and was not serviced by a major road until recently
- * 12 miles from the Ohio River and has no railroad service

Vanceburg

- * Settled by people from Pennsylvania, New York and areas of New England
 - * Saw itself as a river town until the railroad came through
 - * During the Civil War, was a solid supporter of the North
 - * Most of the commercial patterns are oriented towards Ashland and Portsmouth in the east
 - * County Seat
 - * Situated on the banks of the Ohio River and stopover for the railroad
 - * Main economic activity besides the courthouse has been shoe factories
-

Table 2: SUMMARY OF 1990 CENSUS DATA

Demographic	Tollesboro	Vanceburg
Population	3,061	3,962
Families	902	1,070
Households	1,138	1,460
% Female	49	51
% Persons 18 years & under	25	29
% Persons 65 years & over	15	25
Households with no Non-Relatives Living Within	96	94
Persons Per Family Unit	3.06	3.11
% Owner-Occupied Housing Units	81	69
% Vacant Housing Units	13	9
% Owner-Occupied Housing Units Valued Under \$15,000	15	20
% Owner-Occupied Housing Units Valued \$30 - \$75,000	53	44
Most Common Number of Rooms per Housing Unit	5	5

History of Events

Tollesboro School had been the community high school for over 70 years. Efforts to consolidate the school with the county-wide high school began in the 1960s (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999). Every time consolidation was discussed the community protested and the county board of education would postpone a decision for two years. Evidently, this became a pattern on the part of the school board which contributed to the community's expectation that Tollesboro School would remain open even though the school was officially designated as an "interim" school. According to state education regulations, a school must be designated as "permanent" in order for the local school board to commit state funds for building maintenance and restoration. In other words, without a designation of "permanent," any public school is severely limited in the amount of state funds which can be appropriated for building upkeep.

In May of 1989, a group of community leaders began to push for a "permanent" designation for Tollesboro High School. Meetings with the state school board and elected public officials resulted in the clear understanding that such a decision was strictly limited to the local public school board. In October of 1991, the county superintendent officially recommended that Tollesboro High School be closed and consolidated with the county high school at the end of the 1991-1992 school year.

Throughout the remainder of 1991 and 1992, numerous community meetings were held around the decision to close the school. During this time a new Local Planning Committee (LPC) was mandated by a change in the Kentucky School Law (Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990). The LPC was charged with the responsibility to recommend to the county board a comprehensive plan for all school facilities. In March 1993, the county school board formally dissolved the LPC at the request of the LPC since they were "hopelessly unable" to reach any consensus about the fate of Tollesboro School. In July 1993, the school board voted 3-2 to close Tollesboro High School, citing aging facilities, declining enrollments, diminishing finances, and state-mandated educational reform. Between March 1993 and July 1993, the school board voted to make Tollesboro a "permanent" site, rescinded that vote by declaring the

meeting illegal, and held new elections for the school board after redistricting the boundaries three weeks prior to the election which resulted in a long-time Tollesboro supporter being unable to run for reelection. In June 1994, the last class of Tollesboro High School was graduated.

During the 1994-1995 academic year several community-led efforts to reopen the school were made and failed, including an offer to pay up to \$100,000 of the costs of keeping the school open. Following the closing of the school, 175 students from Tollesboro High School refused to enroll at Lewis County High School and instead enrolled at neighboring county schools. In the fall of 1995 a secession vote was put on the ballot to allow the Tollesboro area to secede from Lewis County. In November 1995, this ballot initiative failed. In the Spring of 1997, the former Tollesboro High School property was sold to the Tollesboro Lion's Club. Within 24 hours, plans were announced for the opening of a new school, "Tollesboro Junior and Senior High School" which has 27 students in grades 7-10 at the present time with plans to add an additional grade each year until all grades are represented. The school presently meets in the gymnasium of the former school. The main building has been stabilized by the addition of a new roof which was constructed with volunteer labor from the community. Future plans include renovation of the main building with improvements to other buildings on the campus. An outline of these events provides a quick and clear picture.

Responses of the Communities

The Tollesboro community and the Vanceburg School Board have very different perspectives on the events surrounding the closing of the school and the meanings attached to those events. Each blames the other for all the difficulties. Each interview began with a strong concern about which newspaper the researcher worked for. Very strong feelings and opinions regarding the events surrounding the closing of the school are still present. This was manifested in the refusal of the current county school superintendent to speak with the researcher. His secretary said, "He really does not want to talk with you about it" (Lewis County Superintendent's Office 1999).

Table 3: TIME LINE OF EVENTS

Early 1960s	Consolidation efforts begun by the county school board
May 1989	Community pushes for designation as "Permanent School" instead of "Interim School" in order to receive state funds for renovations and repairs
October 1991	County superintendent officially recommends closure of High School and consolidation with county high school
1991 - 1992	New Local Planning Committee formed to recommend facilities plans for entire county
March 1993	School Board dissolves Local Planning Commission (LPC) at its request because the LPC is unable to attain any consensus about the community high school
July 1993	Local school board votes 3-2 to close community high school after new board is elected following redistricting just 3 weeks before the election
July 1993	Community residents withdraw over \$1,000,000 from local bank in protest
June 1994	Last class of community high school to graduate
November 1995	Community loses ballot initiative to secede from remainder of county
Spring 1997	Local Lion's Club purchases school property
Fall 1997	Former high school re-opens as a new, private, community junior and senior high school
November 1999	With 27 students in new school, 125 people show up to watch their basketball game.

Vanceburg Community. Vanceburg struggles economically. Currently, Lewis County has the highest official unemployment rate in Kentucky. Even though it is the county seat, it is a town where most of the residents travel elsewhere for the services. For example, there is no department store, no theater, no dry cleaner, no bakery, no new car dealership and no national clothing store in the town. There are only two fast-food restaurants in town, both of which are located inside a large, recently constructed, gas station complex. It seems that most political decisions made are “always caught in the dilemma of ‘How to deal with the Tollesboro faction? How to deal with the Garrison faction’” (conversation with a retired community leader, November 1999).

Historically, Vanceburg has been populated by people who came from areas that no one else in the county came from. It was a solidly Union stronghold during the Civil War. No sympathy for the Southern cause was found in Vanceburg. First the river, and then the railroad connected the town to northern markets, not nearby localities. There was very little effort to join with neighboring communities in any significant ways. The area identifies itself as part of Eastern Kentucky.

The closing of the school elicited positive reactions in Vanceburg. The superintendent said about the closing, “We (i.e., the school board) tried not to be antagonistic. We did what was in the best interests of the children in Lewis County” (conversation with the former county educator, September 1999). This same notion was expressed in another interview. “In 1962 (the superintendent) said we need to consolidate these two schools, but the board kept delaying the decision because Tollesboro kept asking the board to keep it open . . . (the superintendent) thought about it for a long time before deciding to close the school” (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999).

The school board made a number of decisions to ease the pain of the closing. They postponed the closing date for one year. They allowed state money to follow any student who chose to go outside of the county system. They allowed the next county to bring a bus into Tollesboro to pick up students who were traveling out of the system. Yet, it was felt that “the little concessions actually made it worse . . . a lot of what they (i.e., Tollesboro) did was just to attract attention . . . there seemed to be a handful that kept things going . . . but each time

they lost a few more votes ... it showed later that the loyalty to the cause was dwindling” (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999).

The superintendent at the time of the closing stated that Tollesboro really wanted a private school within the public-school system. He used the term a “Private School Mentality” that reflects the national movement toward private/charter schools (conversation with the former county educator, September 1999). Other sentiments can be seen in the various comments expressed in interviews and letters-to-the-editor in the local newspapers:

The [Tollesboro] supporters should face reality. Why should the other schools continue to suffer because of a small, self-centered group of people [i.e. the Tollesboro proponents of keeping the school]. (*The Lewis County Herald* July 1995)

Why does the [paper] only cover the Tollesboro version of consolidation? (*The Lewis County Herald* May 1994)

Most [people who participated in the bank boycott] came back the next day and put their money back in. It was mainly a show for the t.v. cameras. (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999)

We are residents of the eastern part of the county ... we have always been proud to be from Lewis County. (*The Lewis County Herald* July 1995.) [Note: Tollesboro is located in the western part of the county]

Several school board members who voted for consolidation chose not to run again in the next election. Most got unlisted phone numbers, threatening letters in the mail and personal visits from angry residents of Tollesboro. One board member got a note that said, “If you vote to consolidate, I'm gonna burn your house down” (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999). A

source reported that during the consolidation fight the previous superintendent said, "I didn't sleep last night [before the interview], I was afraid of what you might ask" (conversation with the former county educator, September 1999).

Tollesboro Community. Tollesboro is a town whose interests and activities have never been directed towards Vanceburg. Historically, the area aligned itself socially and commercially with Mason and Fleming counties (the counties adjacent on the south and west). While Fleming County did agree to be included in the political boundaries of Appalachia during the 1960s, Mason County rejected the opportunity. "The county refused to be seen as part of the mountains and wanted no part of that designation" (conversation with current county leader, August 2000). Evidently, Mason County did not see the economic benefits from the projected federal programs as being worth the stigma of being designated an Appalachian county.

During the Civil War, the Tollesboro area demonstrated substantial sympathy for the Southern cause. No major road came through the town until recently. There is no railroad line nearby and the Ohio River is 12 miles away. The town resisted incorporation several times and seems to be just a group of houses that grew up in the area. Today, Tollesboro considers itself aligned with the outer Bluegrass region of Kentucky (conversation with a community leader and businessman, November 1999) reflecting the same disdain for the identification with the mountains as does neighboring Mason county. There are two civic organizations in the community, the Lion's Club and the volunteer fire department, two dominant churches and three much smaller ones, one county elementary school with an active P.T.O. group, five small merchants including three restaurants, one bank and, until the closing, the high school. Historically, Tollesboro seemed to want its own identity separate from the county with the high school being the last vestige of that separate identity (conversation with a retired community leader, November 1999).

Numerous community meetings were held during the final days of the school. At two school board meetings held in Tollesboro from 650 to 1,000 people from the area attended (estimates based on the size of the school gym). At one board meeting in Vanceburg, approximately 250 Tollesboro residents attended (Lewis County School Board Minutes 1993), which was the smallest crowd at any of the public meetings.

After the decision was made to close the school, the students boycotted classes for over a week. Of the 542 students enrolled at Tollesboro, 376 were absent the first day. On subsequent days the absentee numbers were 341, 282, 321, 270 and 393 respectively (Tollesboro School Record 1994). On July 13, 1992, the *Maysville Ledger-Independent* (1992) reported that over \$1 million was withdrawn from the local bank as a protest over the closing of the school.

The closing of the school seemed to have affected nearly everyone in the small town. Some people who never had kids in the school even expressed very strong feelings against the county. “Everything they [Tollesboro folks] needed was right in the community and the thought of losing the school was like losing a part of their community” (conversation with a community leader and businessman, October 1999). “After the school closed there were..... no substitutes for community activities ... I saw a disintegration of the community's spirit” (conversation with a former minister in the community, January 2000).

Several comments in the county newspaper and other documents are helpful in understanding the feelings of community residents.

They [Lewis County School Board] took our school and tried to rip the heart out of our community. (*The Maysville Ledger-Independent* May 1995)

[Tollesboro High School] ... sits there on the little knoll it has occupied all these years. It has served the community well. (*The Maysville Ledger-Independent* June 1995)

We will not allow our elementary sports team to be bused within the county . . . when we have a home gym available to them right here ... they are the Tollesboro Wildcats, not the Lewis County Wildcats. (*The Maysville Ledger-Independent* June 1995)

When the school board saw they couldn't have a chance to win the ... school selection last year, they

pulled an 11th hour under-the-table trick to redistrict.
(*The Maysville Ledger-Independent* June 1995)

We DO NOT [emphasis in the original] want our children subjected to this type of environment (Vanceburg area) and WE WILL [emphasis in the original] do whatever is necessary to prevent it. (Site-Based Council Report 1993)

Vanceburg is a wet city, with beer and liquor stores prominent and adjacent to the school grounds. Many of the people are non-caring and economically deprived. Harmony does not exist with the teachers. There is wrong doing in the area of school employment. They are not optimistic about their city. Some of their stores are closing. (Site-Based Council Report 1993)

Vanceburg needs to remember, we (in Tollesboro) live in the flat lands, not in the hills. (*The Maysville Ledger-Independent* May 1995).

Video Tapes of School Board Meetings

Video tapes of eight school board meetings beginning in March 1993 and ending in March 1994 (Lewis County School Board Videotapes 1993, 1994) revealed that throughout these meetings, the representatives from Tollesboro repeatedly tried to force a favorable vote to keep the school open. All efforts were turned back. Several key points emerge from these meetings:

- 1) The superintendent argues repeatedly that the interests of all students in the county must be considered. "*We must consider the needs of all students in the county.*" (Superintendent speaking, School Board Meeting, March, 1993).
- 2) The superintendent says that consolidation is not based on

saving dollars, but based on the concern for quality education for all of the county. Nevertheless, the board continues to claim that there isn't enough money to keep Tollesboro open. "*We can't determine what it [the consolidation] will cost until after we close Tollesboro High School.*" (Superintendent speaking, School Board Meeting, March, 1993).

- 3) When challenged by the community residents, the board can not identify the amount of the savings that will be gained from consolidation nor from where those savings will come. "*Consolidation is not based on dollar savings, but a concern for all students.*" (Superintendent speaking, School Board Meeting, April, 1993). When the superintendent was asked what did this mean, he sat in silence for 3 minutes.

- 4) While the board never seems able to define the problem with keeping Tollesboro open, the superintendent gives the following items as advantages to consolidation:
 1. Equalized educational opportunities for all Lewis County students
 2. Increased level of classes
 3. A more efficient education enterprise
 4. Overall money savings.
 5. Fewer teachers and helpers needed
 6. All savings to go to educational opportunities.(School Board Meeting, January 1994)
"Consolidation allows for the broadening of programs such as the elementary music program." (School Board Meeting, March, 1993).

- 5) The board never provides any dollar figures to support the concept of "savings." The representative from Tollesboro asks for actual figures as to where the savings come from and is told that this can not be discussed because it was not on the meeting agenda (School Board Meeting, March 1993).

- 6) The superintendent does not agree to develop analyses of alternatives to closing Tollesboro. The superintendent is asked to develop alternatives to the closing. In response he sits in silence for over 4 minutes and then changes the discussion (School Board Meeting, March, 1993).
- 7) The superintendent seems to be trying to impose his decision for consolidation which appears to be formulated already. The superintendent runs the entire board meeting. The chairman of the board never speaks during the meeting. The remaining board members only speak to vote “yes” or “no” on several seemingly routine matters such as payment authorization (School Board Meeting, April, 1993).
- 8) The Tollesboro faction constantly changes strategies in order to buy time. At one point, they argue to make the school a permanent site, then they argue to make temporary decisions until more bond money becomes available for school renovation, then they argue to allow the Tollesboro residents to pay for sufficient renovations to carry the school through current maintenance issues. (School Board Meeting, February, 1993).
- 9) Throughout these meetings, the more Tollesboro supporters engage the board, the more the board appears to withdraw from the public nature of the meetings. At one point, there is a lengthy discussion as to who owns the microphones in order to prevent the Tollesboro supporters from continuing their questions. (School Board Meeting, April, 1993).
- 10) The school board does not seem to be interested in an open, objective discussion of consolidation. The School Board is asked to state their reasons for wanting to close Tollesboro High School. No one on the board responds. Everyone sits in silence for over 3 minutes (School Board Meeting, March, 1993).

Discussion

There are several important issues that permeate this research. There is the opinion of the school board that the Tollesboro school should be closed because it is in the best interests of all the children in the county. This aligns with the prevailing attitude driving contemporary school consolidations revealed in previous research. However, no one involved in the formal decision-making process provided an explanation, much less a clear and precise definition of what are the "best interests of the children of the entire county." Clearly, there was a definition, but it was not available for public scrutiny. Rather, the definition appeared to fit the "taken for granted" knowledge that allows people to operate semi-automatically as emphasized in symbolic interactionism.

Cost savings were mentioned as the clear reason to close Tollesboro High School. However, no facts were presented to identify, much less to justify, these supposed cost savings. There was no evidence of a study that demonstrated an empirical rationale for closing the school. In fact, the only study uncovered in this research was completed by the Tollesboro community. That study overwhelmingly showed that based on cost savings the only justifiable decision was to keep the school open. Had a study supportive of the school closing existed and been utilized by the county school board, surely it would have surfaced during the legal proceedings. Again, no such study emerged in that process. As in other anti-consolidation efforts, Tollesboro pointed to increased transportation costs as a real stumbling block against the argument of cost savings. There was no evidence that the board of education evaluated this concern in its deliberations about the school. Again, had this been considered, there would be record of it in the official minutes of the school board.

On the other hand, Tollesboro argued against losing its chief identifying symbol and simultaneously employed various tactics to persuade and intimidate the board to keep the school open. Special efforts such as the offer to pay for the roof repairs failed to impress the school board. In fact, based on the facial reactions of school board members in the videotape at that particular meeting (School Board Meeting - April 1993), the board members seemed to be angered by the offer. Nothing seemed to make a difference to the county school board.

The demographics of the two regions provide an interesting comparison. Both sections are amazingly similar. While the Vanceburg area does have lower-valued housing on average and a slightly higher retired population, all other factors are consistent with the probability that the two regions should think and function alike. However, that does not happen. The differences between the two regions are stark and dramatic. Comments in the newspapers reveal this conclusively.

Thus, the findings of this research suggest that a different approach to the data is warranted. Something other than empirical, objective criteria must have been involved in the decision to close the school. Thomas and Thomas (1928) provide the framework to understand the dynamics of a subjective criterion upon which a decision could have been based. Their theorem says that “when you define a situation as real, then that situation has real consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). Looking at this possibility, it is clear that both Tollesboro and Vanceburg have defined the other in such a fashion that cooperation between the two seems at the very least difficult, and perhaps completely impossible. Their actions in the drama of closing the school are consistent with this possibility. Both groups' actions seem to be rooted in their perceptions that they alone can correctly understand the situation and in their assessment that the other area is an unreliable agent for the presentation of the “facts” of this situation.

Clearly, echoes of the stereotypes against the mountains permeate the conversations from Tollesboro. To Tollesboro, Vanceburg is “the hills” which symbolizes backwardness and is an undesirable place to educate children. Such a designation is filled with sufficient negative inferences that the Tollesboro community does not want their children going to school in Vanceburg. Likewise, the supposed elitism of the Bluegrass Region permeates the conversations from Vanceburg. To Vanceburg, Tollesboro is the “flatlands” and symbolizes arrogance and a demand for special treatment. Neither side seems to have any mechanism to dismiss these histories or these echoes. Thus, their actions and claims towards each other are quite predictable and unequivocal. Once more, as Thomas and Thomas (1928:572) suggest, “once you define a situation as real, then it has real consequences.” Therefore Vanceburg has no reason to evaluate Tollesboro's empirical facts; the school board and the superintendent

clearly ‘know’ what is best for the county's children. In like fashion, Tollesboro does not need to evaluate how keeping the school open might affect the county's students or ultimately the overall needs of the county. The leaders in this drama only have to protect what they see as their school and their community's children.

In reviewing all of the data, either the board conceived and utilized some subjective argument in an informal decision-making process prior to the public meetings or the majority of the board members independently came to the same subjective conclusions during the meetings. It is impossible to definitively resolve this issue because the school board members refused to participate in this research. However, the data do show that there was no logical, empirically-based decision-making process. A letter filed in the court challenge of the school closing does support this assertion of a subjective rationale in the decision-making process.

I see VERY LITTLE [emphasis in the original] articulation of how and how extensive ... [the consolidated high school] ... will provide a different sort of ‘quality education for the 21st century’ ... I can only surmise that some reason besides school improvement and educational enhancement is behind the closing of Tollesboro High School. (DeYoung 1994)

Previous research indicates such a possibility can and sometimes does exist.

We think that [arguments about cost savings and college preparation] tiresomely repeated in the current round of school closings, actually serve to conceal the social, political, and economic agendas intended to change the behavior of the affected parties. (DeYoung and Howley 1990:71)

Additionally, there is some evidence that there might be differing agendas held by both Vanceburg and Tollesboro. Historically and currently the two areas do not relate to each other. The comments obtained from various letters to the editor in both the Vanceburg and the Maysville newspaper show this overwhelmingly.

The patterns of commercial activities demonstrate this. The two areas have totally separate county fairs with each claiming to have the larger and better fair. One source in this study reports that there are entire segments of the Vanceburg and Tollesboro population who have never even driven in the other's geographical territory (conversation with a retired community leader, November 1999). Everyone that was interviewed pointed out the demarcation line of "Herron Hill" where the flat land stops and the knobs and mountains begin. This hill appears to be an absolute boundary. "I've traveled in the county since 1982 and absolutely, that is the boundary line ... and everybody knows it" (conversation with a local attorney, March 2000). "Herron Hill is the dividing point . . . you go from a Northern Kentucky attitude to an Eastern Kentucky attitude in Vanceburg" (conversation with a former minister in the community, January 2000). One former minister reported that the county ministerial association tried to span the chasm between the two regions by having various ministers change pulpits and hold community worship services. However, never did anyone from one region attend the worship services held in the other geographical area. Only the ministers were willing to travel into the other area to worship (conversation with a former minister in the community, January 2000).

These attitudes enable Tollesboro to see itself as part of the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky while Vanceburg sees itself as either part of Eastern Kentucky and the region of Appalachia overall or, at least, not part of the Bluegrass. Clearly, until 1993, the Bluegrass Region held sufficient political capital to keep the school open, but in 1993 they lost that capital through redistricting forced upon them by Vanceburg. Without any mechanism to objectively evaluate the school situation, Tollesboro lost its battle to keep the school open.

Conclusion

In the case of the Tollesboro High School, this research points to some key understandings as to how school consolidations result in community conflict. This study provides practical insights into the way community decisions are framed by sociocultural factors and the way in which these factors guide community decision-making processes. This study points to the enormous difficulty in trying to communicate rationale for decisions which are not based in empirical analysis. It

points to the importance of stereotypes and definitions of reality in arriving at and in framing discussions about important community issues.

In trying to discern why the Tollesboro school closed, the most obvious explanation is that social definitions of reality, not empirical analysis, won the argument. Differing definitions were able to emerge because of profound sociocultural differences between these two regions of the county, not objective differences between the two population groups. Neither side recognized nor negotiated the limitations placed upon them by their own culturally-based definitions in order to objectively evaluate the decision to close the school. At the same time, neither could actively engage the viewpoint of the other. Each was bound in its past, in its stereotypes of the other, and in its own cultural ethnocentrism.

This research points out the absolute importance of subjective criteria in the decision-making process at the community level. It gives some hints that subjective criteria may be rooted in historical and cultural differences within the decision-making actors. Such criteria, in this particular case, overwhelmed the meager empirical evidence put forth to justify a decision to keep the school open. The empirical evidence might have been very important, but it never entered the arena of public discourse at any level of the discussions.

Perhaps time will heal the wounds of the two communities and enable them to work cooperatively on other matters. Perhaps time will enable the cultural differences to be minimized. Perhaps time will only exacerbate the clash between those who live in the “mountains” and those who live in the “flatlands.” Further research is needed in order to fully understand this continuing drama.

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