

## The Consolidation of Hermon De Kalb Central School

By M J Heisey



**Ground Breaking for new school. H. Bradford, J. Hance, H. Clafin,  
C. Holland, P. Sayer, H. Stiles, M. Hamilton, S. Gray**

When you come to visit the Town of De Kalb's Old Methodist Meetinghouse Museum, you will see a museum display on rural school districts from 1898 to their end with centralization in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On your visit, you won't miss the sprawling Hermon-De Kalb Central School (HDCS) building just across the East De Kalb Road from the museum.

On the town historian's website there is a history of common schools in the nineteenth century and several personal school memoirs from the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> But we know little about the process that moved education from many small rural schools to one consolidated system that combined not only most students from the Town of De Kalb but those from neighboring Towns, most extensively Hermon.

Fortunately, we can learn more about this complicated and sometimes contentious part of community life in newspaper coverage and, more deeply, from the memories of Pat Bacon and Lenore Bovay, who lived through those years as students and as a teacher.<sup>2</sup> This picture of consolidation is just a start, which should spur other researchers to explore further and to compare with other centralizing school districts.

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In 1898, there were twenty-two school districts in the Town of De Kalb. Not all of these districts would become part of HDCS. In 1948, the newly consolidated Heuvelton Central School absorbed districts 8, 10, and 21. Two years later, Gouverneur Central School formed, absorbing districts 3, 9, 16, 17, and 20.<sup>3</sup> This left fourteen De Kalb districts, which beginning in 1951 joined with districts in the neighboring Town of Hermon and some students from the Towns of Canton and Russell to form HDCS. The board of education of the new central school first met in August of that year. <sup>4</sup> What did consolidating mean in terms of buildings, transportation, teaching staffs, and students in a relatively large geographic area? What did one large district mean in terms of governance and taxation? And, perhaps, closest to many people's interests, how could De Kalb unify with a school that had been its chief rival for years?

The answers to these questions, which were national as well as local ones, were not easy, since this was a broad change sweeping the country. And there were particular difficulties and new opportunities in rural areas like the Town of De Kalb.

Lenore Bovay and Pat Bacon were two of four Elsey sisters who had grown up in De Kalb just in time to help us understand what these changes meant to young people in the 1950s. Their parents, Elmer and Dorothy Matteson Elsey, had a dairy farm on Rundel Road (now Jeffers Road) between De Kalb Junction and East De Kalb. For them, going to school was an opportunity to meet with other children, since there were only three farms on their road and none with children. But education must have also been stressed—their mother was a dietician with a degree from the Agricultural School at St. Lawrence University<sup>5</sup>—and Laura Shattuck, their first, second, and third grade teacher, was a neighbor.

In fact, Pat rode with Laura in order to attend her early years at the Union Free School, district 20, a substantial brick building on Ridge Street in De Kalb Junction. Without that ride, Pat would have attended one of the country schools in another district. Both sisters attended the Union Free School in the village from first through twelfth grades. And both remember appreciating coming from a world where many people knew each other over many years.

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Music was an important part of Elsey family life that blended into school activities and plans for life beyond high school. Their maternal grandfather was a violinist. His brother Tom Matteson played a clarinet in the De Kalb Junction Cornet Band. Their mother played piano at home and at church. She accompanied her four daughters, who sometimes sang as a quartet. Lenore also played violin—spending, sometimes trying, Sunday afternoons with her perfectionist grandfather and playing in an after-school quartet organized by her music teacher. She also played baritone in the band and sang in chorus. Pat played clarinet in the school band.

There was plenty to keep Lenore busy in her 1950–1951 senior year. In addition to courses and music, she was valedictorian and, as such, had to recite a history of St. Lawrence County for graduation.<sup>6</sup> A new gym had been added to Union Free School, delighting students who no longer had to walk across the village for gym class. Lenore was vice-president of the class and art editor of the Senior Issue of “The Junctionette,” a junior-organized publication of “free expression of student opinion in all school affairs.”<sup>7</sup> There was the senior class trip to Washington, DC, and New York City by plane and train. And she was preparing for college. She had chosen State University Teachers College at Potsdam and been accepted into the Crane Department of Music. With all this activity, it is unsurprising that Lenore remembers taking no note of the fact that the August after her graduation brought the first meeting of the Board of Education of the new HDCS.

Lenore’s younger sister, Pat, who graduated from the new school district just two years later, in spring of 1953, had more acquaintance with changes. Her memories, however, help to illustrate the slow and incremental steps of consolidation, in part, explained by conflict over the new school building. Except for the new name, unified sports teams and the school band, and a specialized course such as home economics, Pat explained, the two schools remained separate. Pat is not sure how long this deep separation existed, but she does know that for her junior and senior years, there was little that led to a sense of unity with students from Hermon. Just a year before Pat graduated, a newspaper report noted that HDCS had chosen two valedictorians and two salutatorians from the two high schools due to different curricula and grading systems.<sup>8</sup> Pat and Lenore did remember that school colors changed from the crimson and gray of De Kalb to the green and gold of HDCS. That change meant new band uniforms. And traditions were challenged. Each

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senior woman graduating from De Kalb High School chose a young girl to present the graduating woman with flowers at graduation. That continued in 1953 for Pat, but in the joint graduation, young women from Hermon had no flower girls. The *Demon*, the 1955 yearbook of HDCS, noted in its class history that in the fall of their senior year (1954), “we had the pleasure of all being in the same school.” The yearbook, however, included photos of the De Kalb School and the Hermon School.<sup>9</sup>

Both Pat and Lenore mentioned some discussion of which school name should come first in the newly consolidated district. Pat has a tantalizing memory of students squeezed out of that discussion. Her classmate and future husband, Sanford Bacon, told her one of the names that had come up was Tanner Creek, a stream that flowed through both towns. So when they heard that there was to be a meeting at the Hermon school to choose a name, students were excited to think that they would be part of the naming process. But to their disappointment the new name of Hermon–DeKalb Central School was simply announced at the meeting. At least the name of the new school mascot combined the syllables of De Kalb and Hermon, with De Kalb coming first.

Lenore graduated from college in the spring of 1954 and, by 1956, was teaching in the HDCS, which still was without a new school building to reflect the centralized school. Local newspaper reports help explain what stymied the consolidation of the district. The articles also describe the labor required to run a centralized school district without a centralized building.

As mentioned earlier, the first meeting of the board of education of HDCS was in August 1951. By 1952, state education officials had reviewed proposed sites for the new school. These state officials wanted elementary grades housed in the new building rather than in a renovated De Kalb High School. Clearly, there were multiple players in the process of consolidation.<sup>10</sup> In October 1952 with an enrollment of 615 students, HDCS chose a New York City architectural firm to draw up plans for the building.<sup>11</sup> The 1953 board of education was headed by a president from Hermon and a vice-president from De Kalb. Board members traveled to Albany in September to consult with state officials on the new building.<sup>12</sup>

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In February 1954, voters from the Town of De Kalb approved the purchase of the Clifford Farr property, on the northwest corner of the intersection of U.S. Route 11 and the East De Kalb Road.<sup>13</sup> In November of that year, a photo of the model of the proposed new building appeared in the *Ogdensburg Journal*. A one-story elementary wing and a two-story high school wing were connected by a central section with administrative offices, a gym, a cafeteria, and an auditorium. The caption accompanying the photo included information that Hermon grades one through five would be housed in the renovated “Hermon building,” evidently rejecting the recommendation of state education officials.<sup>14</sup> In December 1954, voters in the HDCS were to be presented with a bond issue, asking voters to approve or disapprove the proposed spending to build the school.<sup>15</sup>

Other newspaper articles in these two years show student classrooms spread across the district. Two full-time kindergartens were announced in the summer of 1952: one in the white school building across the street from Hermon High School and one in an East De Kalb building. In fall 1953, first graders were meeting in the basement of the Methodist Church in De Kalb Junction. In late 1954, classes were also being held in a grange hall and in an old New York Central railroad depot.<sup>16</sup> These make-do classroom locations multiplied as voters rejected the school building bond issues put to them six times between December 4, 1954, and November 20, 1955.

The first vote was on a \$998,000 bond: \$983,000 to build the new school and \$15,000 to renovate the school in Hermon for children below sixth grade who lived in the Hermon area. The bond required a two-thirds vote of approval to pass. Voting was held in the Hermon High School. The vote failed on December 4: 199 voted against the bond, 191 for the bond, 2 ballots were voided. As noted in the paper, these 391 total ballots were cast by a fraction of the 1000 people eligible to vote. Arnold Northrop, supervising principal of HDCS, seemed to take the defeat in stride, noting that the board of education was empowered to call for a new vote and would do so in January 1955.<sup>17</sup>

Three-quarters of a page of the January 6, 1955, issue of *The Tribune Press* came under the bold headline, “Hermon-DeKalb School Building Bond Issue to Come Before Voters of District January 8<sup>th</sup>.” Three photos on the page illustrated the overcrowding and an article reiterated the point in quotes by Northrop for the

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benefit of voters. He reminded them that the De Kalb Junction high school building was seventy-five years old. And he listed all that the current setup lacked: an adequate number of classrooms; designated art, industrial arts, agricultural rooms; an advanced science lab; and a library. Furthermore, the existing cafeteria, gym, and typing room were too small.

A letter to the editor, in the same issue, by “a [m]ember of the Board of Education” of HDCS in *The Tribune Press* expressed exasperation at the no votes, especially in light of long meetings, including ones with a citizens committee, that ran late into the night. Describing classrooms so crowded that teachers could not get to individual desks, calling the De Kalb Junction school building a fire hazard, and noting that one building used by the school had a privy in the backyard, the anonymous board member even tried scripture—Matthew 25:40, whatever you do for “one of the least of these,” evidently Hermon–De Kalb students, you do for Christ. And there was a hopeful claim that once voters had the facts, they would certainly fund a new school.

The author also addressed what may have been criticisms the school board had heard. The architects had worked to make the building one without frills. People who argued that the school was too big should be aware that an estimate of 743 students by 1959 was a conservative estimate. And the writer provided information that might be new to voters. School district taxpayers, while voting on a \$998,000 bond should be aware that they paid only 53 percent of the cost, with the state covering the rest. In addition, if voters would approve the bond issue before a law covering poorer districts expired April 1, the school district could apply for emergency building aid. Furthermore, new state regulations would soon require all temporary school buildings to provide proof of safe drinking water, flush toilets, and separate restrooms for girls and boys.

Questions and answers in the article also addressed financial issues, including differing tax rates in the towns of Hermon, De Kalb, Russell, and Canton as well as in the old districts of Hermon High School and De Kalb Junction High School. The total cost covered the building, furniture, equipment, grading, architects’ fees, and insurance. The architect’s fee was a standard 6 percent of the total cost.

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Did this discussion in local media have impact? Perhaps the January 8 vote, this time in the De Kalb Junction High School, brought out more voters, 543, and more in favor of the bond: 294. With 244 voting against the bond, however, the required two-thirds approval once again failed.<sup>18</sup>

When the third vote on the bond issue failed, 266 to 169, on February 26, after two public meetings in each of the two high schools, school officials headed to Albany apparently for help.<sup>19</sup> The *Ogdensburg Journal* picked up the theme of overcrowding with a full page of ten photographs and an article all by Grace Lowe on April 30, 1955. Lowe covered many topics while working for the paper in the 1950s but was particularly known for her knowledge of education in St. Lawrence County.<sup>20</sup> She wrote with flair in “Hermon–DeKalb: School in a Railroad Station, Church Basement, ‘Bowling Alley’.” Her opening paragraphs set the stage:

How would you like to teach school in a railroad station?

Or in the basement of a church?

Or in a room shaped like a bowling alley so that no one can get a good view of the blackboard.

Twenty-three common districts and two union free districts centralized in 1951 to form the Hermon–DeKalb Central school district. Now the 640 children of the district are housed in seven rural one-room schools, all of them without side toilets; a converted railroad station, a grange hall, the basements of Hermon and DeKalb Methodist churches and two old high schools.

Lowe gave special attention to the De Kalb high school building built in 1875, “a fine example of architecture of that period” but also reflected a period before Joseph Lister made clear that cleanliness helped lower disease, a period when “schoolmarms still wielded a hickory stick,” and when schools stressed Latin and Greek. And she noted Principal Northrop’s joke that Methodists would need to build more churches in the school district. She spent time discussing curriculum, which she said suffered from lack of teaching coordination or even teacher conversations and from inability to group students scattered around the district. The teaching load was relatively high. And there was no Parent Teacher Association.

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But not simply a description, Lowe offered interpretations for opposition. For her, the rock outcroppings of De Kalb and mine tailings indicated poverty of an economy based on farming and mining. Her article claimed that after the third defeat, \$118,000 had been trimmed from the original budget by Albany. She listed opposition, without details, to the proposed site. In addition to different tax rates in different locales, she noted that the tax rate had risen about \$4 since centralization.

Lowe's listing of the board of education at the end of her article included nine members, seven were from De Kalb: Homer Claflin, board president, from De Kalb Junction, along with Percy Sayer; Helen Stiles, Shirley Gray, and James Brice from Town of De Kalb; Margaret Hamilton and Earl Livingston from Old De Kalb. Only John Hance Jr., and Henry Bradford were from Hermon. Lowe offered no analysis of the board makeup, but, perhaps, she was making a point.

An announcement of the fourth vote in May 1955 did yield new dollar amounts. The new bond issue was listed as \$875,000. And the state would cover "about 60" percent of the cost. Had the board applied for emergency aid? And, perhaps, most importantly "under a new State Education Department ruling" a simple majority was needed to pass a bond issue when it was "less than 10% of full valuation" after deducting state aid. (Full valuation is the total value of all taxable property within the school district. The school district could borrow up to 10 percent of this value without special permission from the state.) Nonetheless, with only twenty more voters than in the previous vote, the bond was once again defeated, although by only one vote: 228 to 227.<sup>21</sup>

The anonymous board member must have moved from exasperation to despair, when in June 1955 the bond issue was defeated for the fifth time with more than half of eligible voters voting: 353 to 336.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, HDCS labored on, approving a school budget and, in August noting that the renovated Acres rural school building would house fifth graders who would ride buses that took high school students to De Kalb Junction but then would be bussed to Hermon for lunch. This reminds us that not only buildings were a mosaic; bussing was also a major issue.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps voters were growing weary. Despite a yet lower bond amount, \$795,000, and a public hearing with the architect on hand before the sixth vote, fewer voters

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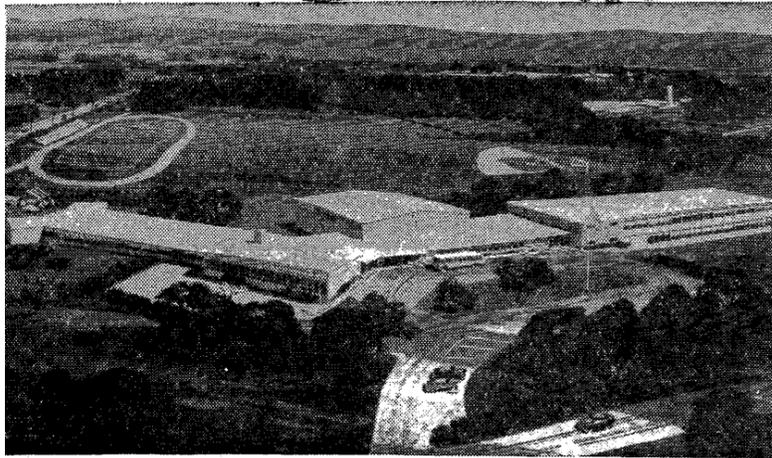
defeated the bond yet again on November 17: 254 to 241 and 5 ballots voided. Northrop noted opposition of Hermon voters, whom he said would like the school to be located in Hermon. They bolstered that desire with the observation that the proposed new school site was at a dangerous intersection of U.S. Highway 11 and the main road from Old De Kalb to Hermon.<sup>24</sup>

In the letter to the editor at the beginning of 1955, its author argued that amid the fragmented school district and crowded school houses “any vestige of modern educational program is then by the grace and ingenuity of that dedicated soul, the teacher.” Lenore was part of that devoted band by 1954, focused on the students not on the political battle in her home school district. She had completed a four-year degree in education in three years, which included three summer sessions, perhaps, an effort to speed the movement of new teachers into the classroom. She had done observations and half of her student teaching in the fifth grade at the Campus School at the Teachers College at Potsdam. The second half of her student teaching was in the first grade of Gouverneur Central School, which hired her as a new teacher in the fall of 1954, right after her graduation from college. De Kalb was not the only school district using churches. Lenore taught first grade in a Baptist church building that had limited space, a bathroom downstairs, and no playground. After a brief break from teaching with the birth of her first child, she returned to teaching in 1956, now teaching third grade in HDCS in the school building in DeKalb Junction.

This was just months after a momentous vote on the bond for the new school building in July 1956. The school board had taken more time—seven months since the last defeat—and made more effort to understand opposition to the building of the new school building, postponing another vote until the board had heard more from resistant voters. In March 1956, a Citizens Committee sent out a questionnaire to 625 taxpayers on the bond issue. While 265 of the 269 returned questionnaires were in favor of a building program, the committee also learned that not everyone supported the one building proposal, hoping instead for two school buildings, one in De Kalb Junction and one in Hermon. Some respondents were specific: in a new building brick faced blocks should be used rather than concrete blocks. The committee met with the contractor John Rouse of Gouverneur and expected to meet with Max Urban, the architect.

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None of this reported response seemed to bode well for the next vote. And, yet, on Saturday, July 7, a big turnout of 774 voters cast their ballots on a \$975,000 bond. Supporters of the new building easily prevailed: 501 to 267 plus 6 voided. Northrop reported that the new building should be ready by September 1958.<sup>25</sup> In the meantime, the 1956–1957 school year expected 700 students being taught in 16 buildings, a breakdown of which *The Tribune Press* reported.



The proposed Central School in East DeKalb

[A] grade has to be removed from the Hermon building and will be placed in the Day district school... The building[s] being used will be East DeKalb school, Old DeKalb, Gilson school [Maple Ridge Road]. Gray school [River Road]. DeKalb Junction Methodist church. DeKalb Junction brick and aluminum buildings. Acres school. Hermon building. Hermon N.Y.C. depot. Hermon Methodist church. Hermon Grange building. Kents Corners school. Day school. Marshville and Porter Hill.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, Lenore's early years in Hermon-De Kalb Central School were highly mobile, including a two- to three-month substitution for an ill teacher from a one-room rural school on River Road, not one listed above. There she had six or seven students from numerous grades, not something her training at Potsdam had covered. By 1959 she had moved from the De Kalb Junction school building to the Hermon school building, where she taught first grade. Groundbreaking for the finally funded new school building came in April 1957 and a dedication ceremony on November of 1958.<sup>27</sup>

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Two years later, Lenore began teaching third grade in the new school building, where she stayed through spring 1967. The fall, however, Lenore moved again. Her old first grade teacher Laura Shattuck was still teaching and persuaded her to shift to teaching a newly established kindergarten class, which took Lenore back to the Methodist church in Hermon. In fall 1967, with the new school, already remodeled to accommodate all the grades from kindergarten through twelfth grade, she moved back to the building we now have, where she continued to teach kindergarten until she retired in 1988.

While reminding us of the long process of centralization, this outline of Lenore's locations only begins to suggest the what teaching meant for a rooted woman in a changing world. A few stories, often told in contrast to educational mores today, illustrate the trials and joys of daily teaching life.

With three grades sitting in the rural school on River Road, Lenore remembers sending two grades out to play while she taught the third. No one supervised the play, which was certainly a bit dangerous especially in winter when the children slid down a rocky ledge. Teaching much bigger classes with only one grade had its own challenges. In her seven years teaching third grade, she had both of her sons, a niece, three nephews, and many other children whose parents she knew well. She wonders sometimes if she did not include her own sons in activities as much as she should have, trying to make sure she did not favor them over other students.

On her first day of her first year teaching kindergarten at the Hermon school, she was the only adult in the building when the lights went out and smoke filled the room. She succeeded in getting the children outside without any of them panicking, but some disappeared, probably walking home if they lived in the village. She went home in tears.

Unsurprisingly, Lenore's students remember other things. Her third-grade classes were special in her eyes and she in theirs. Despite having over twenty-five students in that grade level, Lenore made an impression that lingers. She was recently invited to attend the fiftieth anniversary of a graduating class of HDCS. These were students she had in third grade. Now one a doctor and one a lawyer, students remembered music and dance in her class. She taught them to square dance. That

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prompted another memory: taking her mother's piano to the school in order to infuse her classes with music. Who helped her move the piano? What happened to it when she retired? She doesn't remember the answer to those questions. Instead, her focus is on the students who enjoyed her classes. When Lenore started college, she had been accepted into the Crane department at Potsdam State Teachers College. Indeed, her high school class prophecy saw her as the head of Crane one day.<sup>28</sup> Although she moved to teaching elementary school, she shared her knowledge and love of music with many students.

This brief sketch of the years of consolidation of the HDCS remind us that even our most personal and local experiences are tied to the large changes in our society—the baby boom, the movement from public rural and village school districts to larger consolidated ones. At the same time, our understanding of those changes is interspersed with and often overshadowed by daily events that stand out more sharply in our memories.

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