

COMMENTARY

One Moment, Please... When a school dies



One of two entryways to the Ayrshire, Iowa, public school that closed in 1982, left in disrepair.

Photo by Jason Sethre

By Jason Sethre
Publisher
Fillmore County Journal
jason@fillmorecountyjournal.com

Several months ago, we booked a family vacation via www.vrbo.com. We've had friends tell us about their great experiences, so we figured we'd give it a shot.

We wanted to visit the Lake Okoboji area, but every place I looked at was \$350 or more per night. On www.vrbo.com, I found this farmhouse on Silver Lake on the fringe of a little town known as Ayrshire, in Iowa. It was about 45 minutes from the Okoboji area, and we didn't mind driving to save a little money on lodging.

The pictures of the three bedroom farmhouse were inviting and the cost was only \$69 per night. We booked it and looked forward to our trip.

This past weekend, when we arrived in Ayrshire, Iowa, we scoped out the business district, which consisted of a cafe and a bar; nothing else. But, this is

typical of small towns out in the middle of nowhere.

There was only one thing that really caught our attention as we drove through this town of 139 people. There was this enormous empty school. It was the largest building in town, and looked like it was left to decay in the elements.

After we arrived at our lodging destination, we spoke with some neighbors who resided on Silver Lake. I asked a gentleman who grew up in the area, "How long ago did the school in Ayrshire close?" He told me it had been closed since about 1982. I became more interested in the history behind this vacated small town school, so I did some research on the community and school.

Ayrshire was like a lot of small towns in Fillmore or Houston County, Minn.

The railroad reached the location of the soon-to-be Ayrshire in 1882 and built a train depot, laying a foundation for a community. With Silver Lake nearby, it was sure to be a great place to settle. In 1895, Ayrshire was incorporated.

As the town grew to 391 population by 1940, home to two



This once beautiful public education facility was home to the Ayrshire Beavers until 1982. Since closing, the school has been vacant, vandalized, and deteriorating in the elements.

Photo by Jason Sethre

banks, two grocery stores, a hotel, four denominations of churches, five gas stations, a pharmacy, a lumberyard, a grain elevator, two schools (public and private), and a host of numerous other businesses, I'm sure the future looked bright. Growth probably seemed inevitable and endless.

In 1947, their Catholic high school closed. In the 1980s, the Chicago and North Western Railway abandoned and eventually tore up the rail lines that gave birth to the little town of Ayrshire.

Over the course of less than 100 years, there was a significant rise and fall for this community. By the end of the spring of 1982, the Ayrshire Beavers would be no more. They closed their doors and in 1983 joined up with nearby Ruthven, a population of 700, to form Ruthven-Ayrshire Community School District – home of the Titans.

During our stay at the farmhouse on Silver Lake, I went for an early morning run to the town of Ayrshire. I brought my cell phone along to take pictures.

When I arrived in town, I walked upon the freshly mowed lawn to get a better glimpse of the condition of the two-story building.

The architecture was fantastic, and you could tell that the community didn't just put up a building when they built this school. This building had character, full of brick and carved stone work.

But, as I approached one of the front entrances, I realized how neglected it had become. Someone had broken into the school, and probably multiple times. There was broken glass all over the front steps. The doors, that were boarded up, had apparently had glass in them at one time. A piece of cinder block, probably the vandal's weapon of choice, laid atop the broken glass. The locks on the doors had been tormented to the point they were barely attached to the doors. And, when I looked up at all of the broken windows, I saw the teal-colored curtains were still hanging in the windows of each classroom. There were tattered and torn, surprisingly surviving the midwestern elements.

I didn't go in the school building, but I could imagine the flat roof had water damage, creating other issues inside the old facility. I figured there were probably animals living in the building, dead and alive.

As I looked upon this school,

I felt bad for the community of Ayrshire. I felt bad for the people.

They built this school with optimism. A community does not take their hard-earned tax dollars and invest in such an edifice of education unless they believe this is important for their future generations.

And, then it all fell apart. The school died along with the community. Now they are left with a shell of a building, vacant for more than 37 years.

How does this relate to us?

Like a lot of rural areas, Fillmore County, Minn., has gone through these same challenges I discovered in Palo Alto County, Iowa (home to Ayrshire).

The railroad came to the area, bringing the excitement of industry and opportunity; settlers and peddlers.

And, when the railroad left, the towns had to adapt to survive and hopefully thrive.

So, how have we adapted?

Fillmore County's population hit over 28,000 in 1900, and has been on the decline ever since. We currently hover around 21,000 people.

This undoubtedly impacts our ability to fill our schools. But, as we look around Fillmore County, most of our old school buildings have not been left to rot.

In Preston, the Corson family took possession of the old elementary school and turned it into a hotel and apartments.

Chatfield's old elementary school has become an arts and entertainment venue known as the Chatfield Center for the Arts (aka Potter Auditorium).

With the generosity of Charles Johnson, Sr., Fountain's elementary school became the Fillmore County History Center.

Harmony's city hall, library and community center are located in what was once the Harmony elementary school building.

Lanesboro's old school became Chuch Hill School Condominiums.

Wykoff's empty school has been purchased by Rod Thompson and Rick Stockman, and they have undisclosed plans for the facility.

The old Rushford-Peterson school building in Rushford is now taking shape as Well House Ministry.

And, the old Rushford-Peterson school building in Peterson has been purchased by Jon Helland, a Peterson graduate, who has undetermined plans for the building.

What we hope to see with these old school buildings is some sort of repurposing effort.

Otherwise, we end up with an eyesore that projects an image of a dying community.

When a school dies, the community doesn't have to die with it.

We just need to be creative and open to new ideas.

Conservative Christianity in crisis

To the Editor,

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America became our first "sanctuary denomination" in order to help migrants. It's time for Christians to stand against Trump and denounce all his works and all his ways. With some conservative Christian sects supporting Trump, one wonders if some of these churchgoers even try to follow Jesus.

Not only did Jesus ask you to take in the foreigner, but also to treat him as you would wish to be treated, and saying the wealthy can't enter Heaven and for the wealthy man to give away everything he has. Yet Republicans are now into calling many Democrats "socialists" in order to allow the super wealthy to continue to hoover up money to their God of Mammon. The Republicans might as well yell, "Jesus lover," since Christ is the world's most famous socialist. Jesus attacks on the wealthy may have been the prime reason for his Crucifixion.

If Jesus was here today, gathering a large following, one wonders how many Republicans and so-called Christians would want to see him shut up. There's also the Christian who is anti-abortion and feels that Republican laws may help their cause. If abortions are further restricted, what will the outcomes be? The wealthy and middle class will travel to get an abortion and only the poor will suffer through forced birthing. Again, with Republicans in charge, the woman and child will receive as little help as a miserly heart will allow. The reality is likely continued poverty with increased chances of addiction and criminality.

It's taken Trump to show the raw, deep divide in America and the horror of his easy cruelty, racism, and white supremacy to set neighbor against neighbor, ruin friendships, and divide families. The evil that Trump has set loose will almost surely get worse.

Greg Rendahl
Ostrander, Minn.

FILLMORE COUNTY JOURNAL

136 St. Anthony St. • P.O. Box 496
Preston, MN 55965
507-765-2151 • 1-800-599-0481
FAX 507-765-2468
e-mail: news@fillmorecountyjournal.com
website: www.fillmorecountyjournal.com

Published by Sethre Media Group, Inc. every Monday and mailed third class. Circulation: 12,020 FREE SUBSCRIPTIONS to zip codes served, 1,225 FREE STORE DISTRIBUTION and 200 PAID SUBSCRIPTIONS at \$55 per year, third class or \$105 first class.
DEADLINE for news & advertising is 5PM TUESDAY for the Monday Edition.