

La Plata County Rural Schools – A Step Back in Time

This spring the San Juan Mountains Association (SJMA) will initiate a new project to collect information on the historic rural schools in La Plata County. The project results from information collected on a recent county-wide cultural resource survey conducted by Jill Seyfarth of Cultural Resource Planning and Ruth Lambert at SJMA and the work of local historians Jean Campion and Bruce Spining.

This project will collect information about historic schoolhouses in La Plata County to study the rural educational traditions. These traditions were represented in the construction and maintenance of school buildings, the rural community bonds promoting education of children and youth, and the community economic investments in the school. Rural schools provided the focal point for these traditions; country schools were the center of rural life and an indicator of community stability. Where ethnic and religious backgrounds were mixed, schools were often the public building that provided the community with a multifunctional structure for secular meetings, some religious activities such as funerals, seasonal events, social gatherings, and school presentations. The school was the central core of the rural settlements and they represented the educational commitment of the rural residents. The network of country schools served a sparse population on isolated farms and ranches through a decentralized school organization with local administration and control. Classes were held at small multi-grade schools and the educational schedule was adapted to weather and agricultural/ranching cycles. Often classes were composed of a few children that matriculated through all the school grades together, forming lifelong bonds. In 1959, the rural schools were consolidated into three school districts with larger schools that were primarily focused in Durango, Bayfield and Ignacio.

During the recent county-wide survey several rural schools were identified and many long time residents and former rural students expressed their immense pride in their rural school education and the traditions and practices that were a part of that experience. Conversations with former students reveal that many became successful and attribute their success to their country school education. Former students shared school memories of their teachers, small classes that resulted in lifelong friendships, and their mischievous pranks with outhouses. With these past experiences, former students, teachers, and their families have expressed concern that information about their former schools will be lost if not collected as soon as possible.

This project will help to gather this information. Volunteers will help collect school information from archives, interviews with former teachers and students, family records and historic photographs, and assist with visits to remaining school sites. Volunteers will receive training on project tasks and they will have the opportunity to meet former teachers and students. If you are interested in participating in this project, or you are a former teacher or student at a rural school and would like to share your stories, please contact Ruth E. Lambert at the San Juan Mountains Association at 385-1267.