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THE "FATHER" OF TEXAS EDUCATION: A.M. AIKIN AND THE MODERNIZATION OF TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Gene Preuss

In the new Texas State Capital Complex, beneath the main floor, near the capital lunchroom is an impressive bronze Parthenon of Texas Politics. The bronze busts of Gib Lewis, Lyndon Johnson, and others form a half-circle of some of the most important people in Texas politics. At the very end is a glistening bronze bust of a small-bespectacled man—A.M. Aikin, Jr. More than twenty years after his death, the name A. M. Aikin may not be familiar, although his name adorns elementary schools, scholarships, and endowed chairs of education.

M. Aikin retired in 1979, after having represented the people of the First Senatorial District for forty-six years. During that tenure he missed only two days and was eventually named "Dean of the Texas Senate." He was chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee from 1967 until he retired. His role in passing the legislation that reformed Texas' school system gained him the moniker "Father of Modern Texas Education". Between the years 1937 and 1965 alone, he either sponsored or directed approximately one hundred and fifty education bills. His commitment to educating Texas' school children lasted until his final years. When Paris Junior College named the Science building in his honor, he remarked, "Until all young Texans have the more or less equal chance to show their skills and develop their talents, whether black or Mexican American or white Anglo, we won't have finished the long road that our forefathers set before us."

A.M. Aikin's prominent role in school reform through the Gilmer-Aikin Laws proved to be his most lasting legacy. The Fifty-first Texas Legislature passed three laws in 1949 completely reorganizing the State's public education system, reform package that became one of the most significant turning points in Texas educational history. The new laws transformed the entire Texas public education system from the top, down. They replaced the elected office of State Superintendent with an appointed administrator, raised teachers' salaries without regard to sex or race, elevated the role of the state in what had heretofore been a local responsibility, and increased the amount of money the state spent on education. Even more provocative, the new legislation accelerated the decline of the local one-room school, a cultural mainstay in rural Texas. In all these issues, the legislation faced a serious battle in the House of Representatives during the 1949 legislative session. The fact that the Gilmer-Aikin bills passed at all was largely due to the support of its primary sponsor, Senator A.M. Aikin, Jr., of Paris.

A common thread within the history of education is to view school reform as a battle between progressive and conservative ideologies, or rural school consolidation as an extension of the rural versus urban paradigm. Some oppo-

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ents accused the Gilmer-Aikin reforms of being a part of the political schism generated by the Homer Rainey/UT Board of Regents fight. I propose that the Gilmer-Aikin reforms point to something else. The struggle over the reforms stemmed more from the increasing awareness among rural Texans and their representatives, hastened by the recent war and the depopulation of the rural areas, which meant that rural schools could no longer afford to provide equal educational opportunities without a radical change in the system. Such a development became clearly apparent during the battle over reform between Aikin and State Superintendent L.A. Woods.

A.M. Aikin, Jr. was born on October 9, 1905 in Aikin Grove in Northwest Texas, almost five miles south of Clarksville, Texas. The eldest of eight children, his father worked first as a druggist then turned to farming. He later opened the A.M. Aikin General Mercantile Store in Milton and sold goods on credit to area cotton farmers. The Aikin’s stressed education for their children, and A.M., Jr. attended school through the available ten grades in the Milton schools, then went to Deport for the eleventh grade.

A.M., Jr.’s ambition was to become a doctor, but the economic downturn following World War I halted such a dream. The price of cotton spiraled downwards, and farmers who had taken credit at the Aikin Mercantile gave notice that they could not pay. Welma Aikin later said of her father-in-law, “when the cotton crops failed, then he failed because they couldn’t pay him.”

His father’s financial losses forced A.M., Jr. to end his education in order to help support the family. He began working as a clerk in the men’s department at Arthur Caddel’s department store in Paris. There he worked with Mrs. Lula Morphew, who had a daughter named Welma. He and Welma exchanged vows in 1929.

Aikin won a seat in the Texas House of Representatives in 1932. He served as a State Representative until elected to the State Senate in 1936, where he served until 1979—the longest tenure of any state legislator. In 1963, the legislature bestowed upon him the title, “Dean of the Texas Legislature.” At the same time, he worked in the haberdashery he owned with his brother, Dean, and also managed a law practice in Paris.

Former State Senator James Taylor remembered Aikin as a man you could turn to for advice, particularly when the subject was Texas politics. When the sponsor of a bill came to Aikin to seek his counsel on various issues, he put his long memory in pubic service to good use. Aikin would relate “a personal experience with a similar incident or similar situation that didn’t work out like they anticipated.” If one did not solicit his advice, Aikin might wait until after an actual vote and would then turn to his colleague and say, “Now you just got through making the worst mistake you’ve ever made since I’ve been here.” Yet, Taylor remembered, Aikin might “get mad, but you would have an awful­ly hard time finding out about it.” He was never known to complain, and was often remembered as “a gentleman.” One colleague remembered that Senator Aikin responded to criticism graciously, “I don’t think it gets him greatly upset if someone disagrees with him.”
The special privileges offered people in politics also did not seem important to Aikin. He was once called “the biggest cheapskate in the legislature” for spending the least on office operations. When the legislative session ended, he closed his office and did not hire a secretary between sessions. “People know where I am,” he said, “People don’t come down there [to Austin] to see a secretary. They come to see you.” When lawmakers moved to honor him for his service in 1973, Senator Jack Hightower called Colonel Dean Aikin to plan the special occasion. “They wanted to give him a Lincoln Continental,” Dean Aikin remembered, but he warned the senator that his brother would not accept a new car. Hightower suggested they present it to Welma, but Dean objected. “Oh, no, Jack,” he said, “Come up with something more original than that.” In the end, the legislature established scholarships at Paris Junior College in Aikin’s honor.

Only once did a question of Aikin’s ethics and morality come into question. In his first term in office, the representative with whom Aikin shared a desk noticed him entertaining a young woman. The thought of this young freshman representative capering about vexed his office mate so much that he went back to his hotel and confided to his wife, “I have never been so disappointed in anybody in my life as I have young Aikin.” He continued, “The last two or three days, there’s been a gal sittin’ down there at his desk day and night.” When his wife assured him that the young woman was Welma, things went back to normal.

The initiative for the reform process that would eventually result in the Gilmer-Aikin bills began in early 1947 as a legislative attempt to answer demands for an increase in teachers’ salaries. However, lawmakers argued over how much the state would fund the pay increase. In the end Governor Beauford Jester signed a bill for a proposed teacher pay raise, but he did not sign a funding bill. To solve the problem of funding public education, the legislature called for an investigation into the state school system. Representative Claud Gilmer and Senator A.M. Aikin sponsored a resolution in their respective houses, and Governor Jester supported the survey. When asked if he had decided on a name for the committee, the Governor exclaimed, “Why, it ought to be called the Gilmer-Aikin Committee.”

The news of the Legislature’s investigation of the state’s school problems did not necessarily mean the end of school financial problems. Larry Haskew, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas, remembered that some “had a rather negative view of what would happen.” They speculated that the Gilmer-Aikin committee “was just a face-saving gesture by the legislature” that would accomplish little, and in the end would be remembered as just another committee “that never amounted to anything.”

In fact, the Gilmer Aikin Legislation was not the first attempt to reform the state’s public schools. In late 1939, first-term Texas Governor W. Lee O’Daniel began discussing the problem of “inequalities of opportunities in our Public School System.” He particularly noted the problems of rural schools, offering that they were poorly funded, understaffed, and ill equipped. He tried
to assure his rural supporters that he did not want to do away with small, rural schools, but he did believe that the public wanted "good schools, run efficiently and as economically as they can be without sacrificing their efficiency." In the end, Governor O’Daniel’s efforts at school reform in the early 1940s failed; not only did he fail to anticipate the strong criticism that came from the rural areas, but State Superintendent of Public Education, Dr. L.A. Woods, strongly opposed any reform action.

Many opponents saw the Gilmer-Aikin bills as a harbinger of death for rural schools. “If the rural school is abolished,” warned a citizen, “along with it may go the rural church, and most of the rural activities. IS THIS THE BEST FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR COUNTRY?” A rural schoolteacher wrote Governor Jester, “The school is the life of any community. We have watched neighboring communities die because their schools were disbanded.” The teacher called for increased governmental aid to rural schools, making them more attractive through higher teachers’ salaries and providing better-equipped facilities, and classrooms.

Others forecast that increasing state presence eventually would erode local control of schools. Superintendent L.A. Woods echoed such a sentiment as he again opposed any plans to change his from an elected to an appointed office. He later wrote to Aikin, “my principals of democracy cannot allow me to take any other position than to oppose any move that tends to disfranchise the general citizenship of this State with reference to one of the most important offices within the State Government.” Woods had been responsible for numerous accomplishments in educational reform during a period of economic instability and limited state spending. He pointed to improvements in the school system, and saw no reason to implement the changes represented in the Gilmer-Aikin bills.

Littleton A. Woods was born in 1884 near Burkeville, in Newton County, to a farm family. He worked his father’s farm until he turned sixteen, when he then began to operate his own farm. Like Aikin, Woods also considered becoming a doctor, but after the passage of a law that required four years in medical school, he grew discouraged and turned to teaching.

He began teaching in rural schools in 1905, the same year Aikin was born. Woods worked his way through Baylor University farming and teaching until he graduated in 1919. In 1926, he won the election for McLennan County school superintendent, and then ran in 1932 for state superintendent. His long years of public service to the state’s educational system, like Aikin’s, began in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression, and he remained in office until after World War II, when the Gilmer-Aikin legislation eliminated the State Superintendent’s position. Indeed, of all his political opponents, none posed a threat to L.A. Woods like the Gilmer-Aikin legislative package. As he did with O’Daniel’s proposals a decade earlier, Superintendent Woods opposed the legislation.

But, after seventeen years in office, Woods had accumulated his share of opponents and complainants. For example, how he distributed Equalization
Funds caused some concern. Deputy Superintendents disbursed the funds to rural districts, and some thought such a scheme constituted a virtual political machine designed solely to support Wood's re-election each year. Opponents also charged that deputies used their official positions to politic for Wood's campaigns. Senator Ralph Yarborough characterized Woods as too conservative. "He was slow to move, slow to act, slow to do anything." 

The *Dallas Morning News* reported that Woods's office did not always operate smoothly with other educational offices:

> "The superintendent is, and has been for many years, elected by the people. It has been part of his duties all those years to execute decisions of the State Board of Education. This co-operative relation has not been frictionless. During the last decade or so, on the contrary, it has been marked by discord between these two authorities: discord so constant as to justify saying it is chronic."

Woods did have supporters who objected to Senate Bill 115, which did away with the State Superintendent in favor of an appointed office. Then Representative Preston Smith voted against the bill because he did not believe in "a central agency in the state telling the local school boards what they can or can't do." Some opponents threatened to challenge the Gilmer-Aikin legislation in court over the abolition of L.A. Wood's office under Senate Bill 115. Even Aikin himself did not favor an appointed superintendent.

William Moore, the freshman Senator from Bryan in 1949, remembered, "there was considerable opposition in the Senate" to the proposals. The cost of the program alone guaranteed some opposition in the Senate to the bills. Opposition to Gilmer-Aikin, however, did not present a serious threat to the bills passage. "I don't think there was ever any doubt about its passage," freshman Senator William Moore remembered, "I think there was some that protested it, and I don't recall how many. There weren't many, but it was not a unanimous vote." The more serious challenge to the Gilmer-Aikin legislation came in the Texas House of Representatives in the spring of 1949.

Irvin Wilson, Superintendent of Schools in Hallsville, in Harrison County, Texas, wrote to Senator Aikin about the need for improving public education funding in his district. "We have 500 students," Wilson noted, "and do not even have a gymnasium. Also, ten school buses which [sic] are in bad shape. The people as a whole want this thing done. They are hoping the legislature will do this." If Aikin felt the legislation needed help, Wilson volunteered to bring a delegation to Austin: "If necessary, I could bring the county board, county superintendents, and other school men down there."

Indeed, the amount of public interest in the Gilmer-Aikin bills surprised even veteran Austin observers. The *Austin American* ran an editorial in early May 1949, acknowledging the influence of public opinion on the legislature. "Lobbying has become the people's business," it noted. Once just the purview of former senators and representatives, professional lobbyist representatives of "Insurance, oil and gas law," along with transportation groups, labor interests, and public citizens all began to exert pressure on the Fifty-First legislature.
The writer guessed three times as many Texans came to Austin to speak their mind on legislation during the session, some three thousand interested people. Many of these were teachers. The shift from professional lobbyists to concerned citizens on the other hand, was a good thing, the writer concluded. Representative Rae Files Still of Waxahachie, in her history of the legislative battle noted, "House members complained daily about the increased burden placed on them" by the number of calls, letters, telegrams and personal visits regarding the pending legislation.

While there were many opponents of the Gilmer-Aikin legislation who warned that the bill would erode democracy, increase spending, and destroy the rural community, the vast majority of public opinion supported the legislation. The education reporter for the Dallas Morning News, Alonzo Wasson, reported:

The people of Texas have learned, or at least are beginning to learn, the improvidence of the small school. They have, for example, reduced the number of common school districts in this state from something more than 7,000 (100 in a single county at one time) to about half that number. But it has taken them twenty or thirty years to accomplish that reform.

Not only the general public, but many representatives from rural areas supported the school reforms. Claude Gilmer had planned on becoming a Methodist minister, but found he could not attend a Methodist university because his high school was not accredited. When he failed to complete the entrance examinations, he opted for a Junior College. "I could realize," he later remembered, "that the small, isolated school districts, if they just kept going on like that, why, how could a kid from out here get an education?" Aikin once said of his own schooling, "I studied physics in a country school where we didn't have anything but a book—no laboratory facilities of any kind, not even a sink. I came here thinking a child ought to get an equal educational opportunity whether he was born in an oil field or a cotton patch. That was the underlying principal of the Gilmer Aikin program. I still believe that."

Many people from across the state responded favorably with letters to legislators. "It is possible that in the coming years the [Gilmer-Aikin laws] will be considered as the greatest single step forward in the history of Texas public education. Millions of Texas school children will doubtless profit because of this legislation."

Another letter praised the bills saying, "Surely this is our best investment in democracy." Yet another envisioned "that the people of Texas shall always be grateful to you for your part in improving the educational opportunities for their children."

In October 1949, after the Gilmer-Aikin battle ended, Woods defended his public service record. Woods maintained that he had constantly worked for an "adequate cost-per-pupil expenditure, together with adequate training of teachers." He maintained, "Each two years since 1933 I have taken an oath of office pledging to enforce all existing school laws and to support our constitution." Although he opposed the Gilmer-Aikin legislation, he promised to
uphold the laws of the Fifty-First Legislature, "I will exert every effort within my power to make all laws mean the most for the schools for which they were intended as along as I remain state superintendent."45

Woods published results of the findings of the Council of State Governments report on the status of the nations' schools, "The Forty-Eight State School Systems" He pointed out how much public support for Texas' schools had increased from 1937-8 to 1947-8. He also showed that thirty-eight other states had more one-teacher public schools than Texas. The State ranked third in number of teachers with degrees, had one of only ten state departments of education with over 75% of its professional staff with Master's degrees, and only one of twelve state departments with staff members having Ph.D.s.46

In the end, the battle between Aikin and Woods, two East Texas men from rural backgrounds, evolved into a fracas between competing reform ideologies. Both understood the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools, and both knew rural schools had to change. Woods was a progressive educator, but his Progressivism was of a different generation. Woods based his progressivism on the earlier notion that improving country schools would improve rural life, thus he believed the preservation of the rural school a vital concern. Furthermore, he viewed the superintendent's role as one essential for insuring moderate, not radical, change. "Educational revolutions sometimes revolve backward. Evolution is better and safer," the conventional wisdom went when he began teaching.47

Aikin represented a new rural educational progressivism, one that stressed increased efficiency. "There is only one goal and only one to be considered," he said, "and that is do we get a better school system or not. The real reason for working on these bills is to try to get a better school system."28

While some look back now at the legacy of the one-room school with sentimentalism, the Gilmer-Aikin legislation made it possible for future generations of students to have better educational opportunities than Aikin himself had. In the end, perhaps, the grandest honor befitting someone who worked so tirelessly on behalf of Texas education is not the bronze bust in the Capitol building, but the thousands of Texas high school students who graduate each year from accredited high schools. As a Houston Post editorial eulogizing Aikin stated, "Young Texans are studying in the universities and graduate schools of the state and across the nation because of public school preparation envisioned and shaped by Sen. A.-M. Aikin Jr."49

NOTES
1 During a brief search on the Internet, I found the name A.M. Aikin associated with elementary schools in Paris, TX, Dallas and the New Caney ISD. The University of Texas has two A.M. Aikin Regents Chairs: one in Education Leadership, and the other in Community College Leadership.
2 A.M. Aikin vertical file, Center for American History, the University of Texas at Austin.

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