

Introduction

On 11 April 2002, the U.S. Department of Education held a rally at its Washington, D.C., headquarters to celebrate its signature reform measure, No Child Left Behind. Community activists, students, and even local football star Darrell Green paid tribute to the new federal law. Secretary of Education Rod Paige unveiled the eight new entrances to the department's headquarters, built to protect passersby during renovations to the building's facade. Each one was shaped to resemble America's most enduring educational symbol: the little red schoolhouse. Like so many other renditions of the icon, each entrance bore a slanted roof and a bell tower; the only new element was the name of the schoolhouse, "No Child Left Behind," which was starkly emblazoned across the front. "We serve the ideal of the little red schoolhouse," Paige told the rally. "It is one of the greatest sym-

bols of America—a symbol that every child must be taught and every child must learn, that every community was involved and every parent’s input valued. Those little schoolhouses were built to serve a need: to equip children as citizens and workers.” As the new entrances suggested, No Child Left Behind would do the same. Invoking the best of America’s past, it would prepare us for an even brighter future.¹

Yet critics of the measure summoned the Little Red Schoolhouse *against* No Child Left Behind, claiming that the new law assaulted long-standing traditions of local control. In a 2006 television advertisement, for example, North Carolina county school board candidate Christopher Knight portrayed a little red schoolhouse under attack from the Death Star space station of the popular *Star Wars* film series. “When it comes to education, government bureaucracy is like a cosmic bully,” a voice-over warned. “Legislation like No Child Left Behind is targeting and destroying our ability to best teach our children.” Then the thirty-two-year-old Knight appeared, brandishing the same type of light saber that Luke Skywalker used to vanquish his enemies. “I believe in local control over our own schools, because I have more than enough faith in the parents and teachers of Rockingham County,” Knight declared. Knight went down to defeat in the November 2006 elections, but his advertisement developed a small cult following; by April 2008, it had been watched more than two hundred thousand times on YouTube.²

Despite their differences, Rod Paige and Christopher Knight could agree upon one thing: the importance of the little red schoolhouse itself. So does the rest of the country. Whatever their political or cultural orientations, whatever their race or class or ethnicity, Americans use a remarkably consistent icon to symbolize their diverse educational institutions. A century ago, most American students attended a one-room school; today, almost nobody does. But *images* of the little red schoolhouse—its roof, its bell, its flag, and most of all its color—are ubiquitous, instantly recognizable to anyone who reads a newspaper, watches television, or shops on the Internet. The cyber-auction Web site eBay listed fifty-four different items for sale in August 2007 that bore a little red schoolhouse theme, including school-shaped Christmas tree ornaments, birdhouses, clocks, quilting patterns, and jewelry. “Red school house with a bell tower,” read the description for a silver-and-enamel charm, which sold for \$12.88. “Don’t be tardy to class! Great for teachers and students.” The previous month, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a cartoon to accompany a plea for more state funds for the city’s ailing public schools. All the cartoonist needed to draw was a bell tower and flag atop the map of Pennsylvania, with a dollar sign locating Philadelphia on the map. Readers could figure out the rest.³

This book tells the story of how—and why—the little red schoolhouse became an American icon, shared and beloved by all. Amid the industrial boom of the late 1800s, poets started to

celebrate the one-room school as the locus of America's lost rural simplicity; artists painted it red, even though most real schools were white or gray. Single-teacher schools came under fire at the turn of the century from self-described progressive reformers, who sought to replace them with larger, consolidated institutions. They also took aim at the sentimentalism surrounding the one-room school, exposing the wide gaps between its romantic image and its harsh reality. Into the Great Depression, liberal muckrakers and photographers portrayed the rural one-room school as the ultimate emblem of American poverty and inequality. But these criticisms melted away during World War II and the Cold War, when the little red schoolhouse began to symbolize America's timeless democratic heritage in the face of its totalitarian foes. From the 1960s onward, finally, conservatives have celebrated the one-room school for its rigid discipline and instruction; on the left, meanwhile, partisans praised it as the precursor to group learning, open classrooms, and other pedagogical innovations. Across the political and ideological spectrum, it seemed, everyone envisioned the schoolhouse they needed to see.

Yet politics and ideology cannot, by themselves, account for the enormous grasp the little red schoolhouse has upon the American historical imagination. Nor can we reduce it to the influences of powerful national elites, who are defied—but never deposed—by ordinary local folk.⁴ Such perspectives ignore the everyday experiences of America's irreducibly diverse population;

even more, they do not explain how one simple icon can unite these different constituencies into a single, symbolic whole. Across history, to be sure, cultural leaders like Rod Paige have tried to manipulate the little red schoolhouse to serve their present-day political purposes; just as clearly, challengers like Christopher Knight have enlisted the image to advance their own goals. But these machinations cannot help us grasp why a Madison Avenue clothier marketed a “back-to-school” sweater with a one-room red schoolhouse on the front; why a Michigan antique store in a strip mall calls itself Little Red Schoolhouse; why several recent best-selling children’s novels take place in one-room schools; or why two episodes of the crass cartoon satire *South Park* featured the song “School Days,” the now-classic ode to the single-teacher school.⁵ To understand these popular representations, we need to study a much broader swath of social activities—including art, music, fashion, and film—than “politics” can reasonably incorporate. And we need a theory to explain what binds them together into a collective image, retaining enormous sway over all Americans.

Any such theory must start with Americans’ deep ambivalence toward progress itself, the idea that humankind in general—and Americans in particular—are steadily improving in knowledge, morality, and happiness. Americans like to think of their nation at the helm of history’s positive arc, leading the world into ever-better spheres of conduct and contentment. Yet despite the prevalence of this idea—or, perhaps, because of it—they are also

gripped by a profound nostalgia, a yearning for yesterday that has obsessed every generation since the birth of the republic. The faster Americans move forward, indeed, the more they pine for the past; plunging headlong into progress, they fear they are leaving something vital behind. *Nostalgia* derives from the Greek noun *nostos* (return home) and from *algia* (longing). So it literally refers to homesickness, which Renaissance-era physicians described as a physical malady; afflicting soldiers, especially, it was treated with leeches, emetics, and opium. Today we think of nostalgia as a wistful and oftentimes pleasurable emotion, which brings us back to a home that no longer exists—or never did. And the little red schoolhouse is a perfect conduit for this feeling, because it is both a school *and* a house. When Americans imagine it, they are home.⁶

Home, of course, means many things to many people. But most of all it conjures family, the intimate configuration of human beings who create and nurture others. Not surprisingly, then, much of the passion for the little red schoolhouse stems from its symbolic association with familial patterns, habits, and rituals. Observing Minnesota's last one-room school in 2002, a reporter raved about its many "family touches": children's heights were penciled on a doorjamb, they brought their dogs to visit, and everyone went fishing during lunch hour. To others, meanwhile, the little red schoolhouse embodied the stable, close-knit family structure that Americans desired—but rarely sustained. In the 1978 children's novel *To the Tune of a Hickory Stick*,

a young girl even takes refuge in the local one-room school to escape her sadistic guardian. “I couldn’t ever, never remember being so happy in my whole life before,” she notes. “God was surely good to me, getting to live in the schoolhouse with my beloved books, my beloved brother, and my loved, loved teacher.” Eventually the teacher marries her mother, who was widowed years before, and everyone lives happily ever after. But in the real world, Americans knew, things were rarely so tidy. “The families are just not close anymore,” admitted one New Yorker, restoring an old one-room school in 2004. “It is really different and it’s nobody’s fault. It just happened—it’s progress.” Progress was inevitable, in short, but so were its costs.⁷

A second set of costs lay in the realm of “community,” another standard focus for schoolhouse nostalgia. Despite its many advantages, the argument goes, modern society has forsaken the neighborly, face-to-face relationships that formerly bound Americans together. And nothing symbolizes this lost community better than the little red schoolhouse, which connected different families into an integrated whole. Inside the classroom, children learned to share and care for one another; and the school itself served as an anchor for the community, a site for evening meetings and a fulcrum of local pride. “We didn’t have electricity, no radios, no TVs, poor roads, not many telephones—but we had our schools,” recalled a South Dakota woman who taught in the early twentieth century. Since then, it seemed, Americans had gained the whole world of technological conveniences and lost

the soul of their communities. “How often have you seen your neighbor lately?” asked one Michigan woman in 1993, bemoaning the demolition of her old one-room school. “Do you play cards together, dance and laugh together, talk over your plans and problems and the state of the nation?” Americans did all of that in the one-room school, of course, but now it was gone. “They say it went to make way for ‘progress,’ but it hurts,” she concluded. Bracketed with quotation marks for good measure, “progress” never quite lived up to its advance billing. Providing material riches, it impoverished Americans in the ways that mattered most.⁸

Last, and somewhat paradoxically, the little red schoolhouse also came to signify the country’s lost values of individualism: freedom, hard work, and self-reliance. On the one hand, Americans worried, contemporary society was fraying communal bonds; on the other, it inhibited individual initiative, persistence, and responsibility. But the little red schoolhouse could represent both community *and* individualism, which more than any other factor helps explain its long-standing symbolic power. In the early 1990s, one Michigan citizen praised the one-room school for fostering caring personal relationships—and also for insuring that children took care of themselves. “Those were the days of Rugged Individualism,” he wrote, noting that students worked hard in school and then did farm chores when they got home. “We go about ruining our own children by being too good to them.” In a preface to the leading history of the

one-room school, likewise, former First Lady Barbara Bush described it as a “community center” as well as a beacon of personal improvement. “Despite their real hardships, country schoolchildren . . . learned a curriculum steeped in such values as honesty, industry, sobriety, and patriotism—values we all cherish,” Bush wrote. If there were tensions between the community and the individual, they melted away in the happy haze of the little red schoolhouse.⁹

Bush’s paean to patriotism points to a final symbolic role for the one-room school: as an emblem of the nation. From the turn of the twentieth century, the little red schoolhouse took its place alongside the flag, eagle, and Uncle Sam in the American patriotic pantheon. Like these other symbols, the one-room school would be invoked by a vast array of citizens for an equally wide array of purposes. Yet after mid-century, when most of the real one-room schools closed their doors, almost nobody questioned the emblem itself. The little red schoolhouse stood for America writ large, so it was an unvarnished good, even when—or especially when—America lost sight of its lessons. “Patriotic songs were learned and sung, the flag salute meant a lot to each pupil, and the picture of Washington was held in respect,” wrote a former one-room-school teacher in 1980, lamenting the alleged decline in national pride. By remembering the little red schoolhouse, then, Americans could rediscover their patriotic passion. “I am sure that all of those, who were taught, and learned their A B C’s and 3 R’s . . . would agree that those one-room, country

schools, located within a walking distance of every child, were the Cornerstone, and the Teachers were the Keystones of the Greatest Nation on earth, the United States of America,” wrote one memoirist, in a typical passage. He concluded with an unattributed piece of verse, which focused on the ambiguities of memory itself. “You have your memories, and I have mine. / Remembrance has brought / Both delight and regret in our time.”¹⁰

This book weaves together personal and collective memories of the one-room school. Inevitably, they shape each other: you have your memories and I have mine, but we are both influenced by the shared stories passed down across the generations. These stories are “true” in a mythological sense but often inaccurate in a historical one, departing from what “really” happened, as best we can determine, in the American one-room school. In the pages that follow, however, I am less interested in exposing these distortions—nobody likes a scold!—than in explaining who remembered what. Across other times and into our own, the little red schoolhouse has brought remembrances of both delight and regret. This book tries to figure out why.