

Interview with Fred Huddlestun

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue and we are here in Newton, Illinois, to talk about the school reorganization that took place in 1971 involving Jasper County. We'll be interviewing Fred Huddlestun who has been a long time board member and resident of the district. So Fred, could you us some personal background about yourself, your work experience, your education and your family history.

Huddlestun: Sure. My name is Fred Huddlestun. I am a lifetime resident of Jasper County. My family consists of my wife Sharon who I married in 1979; we have three daughters: Amy who was born in 1983, Amanda who was born in 1985 and Alyssa who was born in 1990. All three daughters are married. My work experience is, I am basically a lifetime farmer. I have a grain and cattle farm near Yale which is in the northeast corner of Jasper County.

Pogue: As far as education, you went to schools in the county?

Huddlestun: I was a graduate of Yale grade school which was one of the districts that went into the unit. And then I graduated from Newton High School in 1975.

Pogue: You've been involved with the School Board. Could you give me some background about how many years you have served on the Board of Education?

Huddlestun: I was first elected to the school board in 1995 and I have been the Board President since 1997. Prior to that I served on some various parent committees and other things in the unit before running for the Board the first time.

Pogue: What got you interested in being a Board member?

Huddlestun: I had three daughters in the school and I was just interested in working for the school district and felt this was something I could do to help out.

Pogue: Why we're talking about Jasper County is, I believe, it is the largest geographical area in the state for one school district. Could you give us some history about what communities are part of that district?

Huddlestun: Are you wanting the elementary schools that went together or...

Pogue: Let's first talk about what are all the towns that are located in Jasper County that are part of this school district.

Huddlestun: Okay. 'Course the larger town would be Newton which is the county seat and is pretty much in the center of the county. The smaller towns, villages that came into the school district were my hometown of Yale. There's a town of Willow Hill, town of St. Marie. There was the town of West Liberty, the town of Bogota, the town of Hidalgo. Then there were some rural schools in the Grove area and also in the Muddy area. Did I list the Bogota one?

Pogue: Pardon?

Huddlestun: Did I list Bogota? There is a small town of Bogota, it had a small school at the time also.

Pogue: How many counties does the Jasper School District make up?

Huddlestun: Basically we are just Jasper County but because of people wanting in and out of the district we have lapped into other counties to the point where now have activity in five counties: those being Jasper, Richland, Clay, Effingham and Cumberland. But there is a very small number in each of these other counties. Jasper is our home base and where most of our people are.

Pogue: Do all the residents who live in Jasper County go to the Jasper School District?

Huddlestun: No. When the unit was formed in the southeast corner of the county on the east side of the Embarras River there are some residents in Jasper County who went to Oblong because that way they didn't have to contend with crossing the river. There are also some students around the Willow Hill area on this side of the river who attend Oblong High School. And then, and ah, we have some people in the county who have gotten out to go to other school districts

around because of work or convenience if they live close to the border, that was closer. And then one other issue that we have in our school district, we do have a parochial school here. It's St. Thomas School.

Pogue: How many square miles make up the school district then?

Huddleston: I believe it's around 460 square miles. Four hundred and sixty two I believe is the exact figure.

Pogue: And has that stayed fairly constant since the beginning of the school district in 1971?

Huddleston: To my knowledge it has. Like I said, the people who get in or out usually just move the property the house is setting on, maybe a half acre or an acre or something. They usually don't move large amounts of land.

Pogue: What created the interest in forming a merged unit district from all these communities that you mentioned?

Huddleston: I believe there were nine elementary districts and a high school district operating in the county at that time. Some of them were having problems with: financial issues, couldn't attract the necessary staff, they couldn't offer the students the curriculum they needed and I believe there was just a general consensus that they needed to consolidate the schools to offer the kids the better education.

Pogue: Were these communities already sending their students to Newton High School?

Huddleston: Yes. We only had one high school in the county. Several years ago there was a high school at Willow Hill but it had been closed—I don't know how many years before—several years before, and all the high school students in the county had been coming to Newton High School.

Pogue: What were considered to be the advantages of merging in addition to the ones you just mentioned?

Huddleston: I think the hope that they could get better facilities, and just offer the kids a broader curriculum, attract a better staff, and just give the kids more opportunities.

Pogue: And did this selection, back in those days, have to pass in every community. Is that correct?

Huddleston: That was my understanding. At that time it was and I assume that it did because they all would have it passed to have went together.

- Pogue: What was the view of the various boards of education based on what your history shows of Jasper County in their view of creating such a large district. You had, you said, nine to ten different schools districts that merged. What were the feelings of those members that were on the board?
- Huddleston: I've read the feasibility study several times that was done and the committee work that was done leading up to the forming of the unit district. All of those school boards and school districts had representatives on those committees studying it and working on the issues. So my feel would be that all of those boards felt a need to do something at that time.
- Pogue: And the referendum passed in 1971 and then were they able to start after that to create then the Jasper School District?
- Huddleston: Yeah, I don't remember the time line but at some point after the referendum was passed then there was an election held for a unit board and after that was elected, that board met and agreed to accept all the school districts coming in and all their financial obligations and whatever money and equipment they had and just took it all in and started the workings of the new school district.
- Pogue: As to your set-up with your school board, is it by territory or how is that divided, or is it just at-large?
- Huddleston: It's more or less at-large but there is a requirement in the law you can have no more three per congressional township. And so once in a while, the way that breaks out, congressional township is section and range, once in a while you can get into a possibility where you either have enough people on the board and candidates running to where you could have a conflict of having more than three, but it's been very rare that that's ever come up.
- Pogue: You're covering four hundred and sixty two square miles, and you had nine or more districts going together. Are there some geographic areas that are not represented by the board of education?
- Huddleston: The electorate has done a pretty good job of having board members elected that are pretty well spread all over the whole county, so no area should feel like they don't have a board member from their area on it. Sometimes it's not always possible; if nobody from an area runs, of course, they can't be elected but most of the time they're spread around the county fairly well.
- Pogue: Newton is the center of the district. How much population does Newton make of the school district? Is it half or more than half?
- Huddleston: I believe Newton is around 3,000 and our school district is around nine I think in the county more or less.
- Pogue: Okay. Once the merger was passed in 1971, although you were just in eighth grade at the time, did you know or hear of any problems with the areas feeling

they were left out of any of the upcoming changes that were taking place in the district?

Huddleston: I don't know about left out, but the first year that they went unit they left everything the way it was. All the schools operated just as they had been, K-8 buildings or whatever they were, and then the next year they consolidated down to having three junior highs in the county and then used the other remaining buildings for elementary buildings. And of course some people I think were upset because their building wasn't chosen for the junior high building or because they had to do something different than what they had done. But the system worked and served us pretty well for several years.

Pogue: Well, could you give us a little overview of the history of the district over the last forty years regarding building closings?

Huddleston: After the initial, when the district was first formed they did close the West Liberty School and the Bogota School. The rest of the buildings pretty well operated as they were. They might had to change the use of them, the grades that were in the building or something, but they continued to use them until about nine years ago. At that time we had started losing enrollment and we'd lost some state aid and the numbers in the outlying schools some of them were getting small so at that time the board voted to consolidate the junior high and brought all the junior high students to Newton. Closed two or three outlying buildings and used the others that were left for elementary schools. That was the most radical change at that time until a year ago and then the board voted at that time because we'd had further enrollment declines to move the junior high into the high school because the high school numbers had gotten smaller and there was plenty of room there for the junior high students. Moved the junior high to the high school, made the grade school in Newton a one through six building, kept the St. Marie Elementary building for Kindergarten and Pre-K, and closed the remaining other schools.

Pogue: What were the feelings in the communities that lost their schools?

Huddleston: Obviously a lot of them didn't like it. Some of the people were good enough to understand the need and the situation because of declining revenue and declining numbers. But you will always have a certain amount of people that aren't happy if you change the way they've been doing things. The board just had to deal with it.

Pogue: So school closings have taken place over the last fifteen, twenty years?

Huddleston: Probably the last ten.

Pogue: Last ten. Have you had any new construction to the remaining buildings?

Huddleston: Prior to consolidating the junior highs—it would have been about fourteen years ago—there was a referendum put forward at that time to build a middle

school in Newton. That referendum was defeated by about a two to one margin. So the board at that time then voted to put an addition on the Newton Elementary building. We were able to do that by closing the Rose Hill School and selling life safety bonds off of it. And we also received about \$800,000 of money from the Capital Development Board, through a construction grant to help pay for that addition.

Pogue: What is the age of the high school?

Huddleston: It was built in several phases. I believe the first, the oldest part of it, was built around 1921. And then it had additions over the years and the last addition I believe was in 1970 when they added the library and the business rooms on.

Pogue: And what about the addition of the junior high to that building? Is it...

Huddleston: The original building was built about 1950 and then it's just had this one addition.

Pogue: And what about the elementary?

Huddleston: The St. Marie Elementary building was built in 1967. And then I guess at the time they went unit, they did add one more classroom to that building which would have been in '71 or '72.

Pogue: And then your K-6 building?

Huddleston: That's the one I'm speaking of, the St. Marie building.

Pogue: So then as far as new construction Jasper County has fairly older buildings as far as age?

Huddleston: We have older buildings but the buildings have been well maintained and that's one thing that I guess has worked against us when you talked about trying to build something new. People don't see a need for it because our buildings look nicer and are in good condition.

Pogue: What has been the history of school enrollment over the last twenty years?

Huddleston: It remained fairly constant for several years after the unit was formed. It would have ups and downs. But then starting about in the mid to late '90s, we started declining, our enrollment declining. When I was first elected to the board in 1995 we had around 2,000 students in our unit at that time. Now we have around just a little over 1,300 students so we've lost basically a third of our enrollment in that period of time, whatever that would be, fourteen years or so?

Pogue: And what has caused the decline of the population?

Huddleston: People having to go other places to find work, an aging population. A lot of the people in the county, either their kids are grown and have moved away, just a decline in the number of births in the county.

Pogue: You've been a board member since 1995. What've been some of the major challenges that the board has faced with such a large school district geographically?

Huddleston: Of course obvious, the most obvious one would be transportation issue. Actually by consolidating as we did a year ago and bringing most of the students to Newton, it actually reduced some transportation because when we were running the outlying buildings we had a lot of shuttles running kids back and forth from building to building. Now they just start at the outside of the county and work their way in until they get to Newton. But transportation has always been a problem, and a major expense. Probably the other big issues we felt had been financial because of our declining enrollment we were placed on Hold Harmless Funding back in the late 1990's. And then two or three years ago the legislature phased out Hold Harmless Funding and we lost over a million dollars of funding we'd been receiving annually through that. So we've had to deal with that loss of money.

Pogue: And could you tell our listeners what does this Hold Harmless mean? Why was it put into effect?

Huddleston: It was my understanding that the legislature put that in place, because if your enrollment declined, you still had to offer the same programs. With teacher tenure laws, you couldn't immediately get rid of staff. You had contracts for service with people. And it just took time to reduce things and get down to where you matched to where your staff and everything matched your income. So it basically just guaranteed you that your income would stay stable for a period of time.

Pogue: And you said Newton is the center of the county. How far then to your outer regions, how many miles is it from Newton County to your extremes?

Huddleston: Probably twenty five miles, or thereabout, would get you to the farthest point in the outlying corners.

Pogue: Are there any other major issues tied to the size of the school district that you've been dealing with as a board of education? You've talked about the issue of buildings and the reorganization. You've talked about transportation. You've talked about the declining enrollment and all those pressures and the finances. Are there any other factors that you've been dealing with?

Huddleston: I guess I can't think of anything off the top of my head.

Pogue: Do you have any cooperative agreements with any of the neighboring school districts, the community colleges, or any vocational centers?

Huddleston: We have a special-ed coop formed with several of the school districts around here. It's called SESE, Southeastern Special Education. And it's very useful to us to provide for the needs of students with special needs that we might not individually be able to do, but by school districts working together we are able to do that.

Pogue: And as far as the community college Jasper is located in?

Huddleston: We would be in the Olney Central College District. We have some students that go to Lakeland and we have some go to Lincoln Trail College in Robinson. Okay. Because we are in the OCC district some of the high school students are able to receive dual credit on some of their classes if they meet the criteria for that. We've had some other co-ops we've been able to work with other districts. We've had a purchasing co-op with several school districts that we bought our paper products through. There've been some things like that where we've been to work with other school districts to be financially beneficial to everyone.

Pogue: As far as any assistance from the State Board of Education, have you had some assistance from them as a board member working in this district?

Huddleston: Probably one of the biggest ones that comes to my mind is their help with financial planning. They have people they can send that work with our superintendent in projecting, and pretty successfully, what our financial situation is going to be with the data and the information they have available. The board was able to make use of information our superintendent provided us on that in our decision to move the junior high to the high school because we could see with the loss of hold harmless and the other potential loss of state money and maybe even possibly a loss of some local money that we needed to do further consolidation so we could try to maintain the programs we had and to provide for our students.

Pogue: Have you had any assistance from the regional office tied to your district?

Huddleston: I think most of that is in operations. The superintendent can probably speak better to that. They help us I think with training some bus drivers.

Pogue: Do they provide, do they run the alternate high schools?

Huddleston: Yes, they run a safe school program and an optional ed program that we're able to send students to, to meet special needs. Also, the regional superintendent is the life safety officer for this area so they are able to help us with some, on some life safety issues to make sure we keep our buildings safe.

Pogue: And as far as local legislators, has the Jasper Board had to work with local legislators tied to any legislation that would impact the district?

Huddleston: Well, I think the superintendent and the board members all contact our legislature, our legislators when we have points of concern whether it be about funding or requirements they're passing onto the board. Right now I know several of us have contacted our legislators because the governor has proposed a large decrease in transportation funding and that's a very drastic cut for our school district because we are so large. I know several of us have e-mailed and contacted our legislators with our concerns about that.

Pogue: And how did the Jasper board deal with the loss of transportation funding? You're required to do the bussing so how were you able to pay for those funds when you didn't get it from the state?

Huddleston: Well at this time I don't know that we have fully made it up. When we did this consolidation we did a year ago where we closed the junior high or moved the junior high to the high school and closed some outlying buildings. Even though some of the kids had to travel farther, we were able to reduce transportation times, reduce some bus routes, cut out most of our shuttles which were hauling kids from one building to another, and that's been the biggest thing we have done. Beyond that there's not a lot we can do because, as you said, we have to provide transportation for the students.

Pogue: On a personal level, as a board member and a board member since 1995, being in the largest consolidated district in Illinois, what potential new challenges do you see on the horizon over the next few years?

Huddleston: For us, the biggest one would have to be the financial things. The uncertainty of what's going to happen in Springfield and whether what money they will promise and then whether that money will even show up makes it very difficult to try to budget and project ahead when you just don't know what's coming. I know there's a lot of talk about forced consolidation in the state. I guess the local people aren't too worried about it because we're already the largest district in the state and the biggest geographically in the state. But for some school districts there may be issues coming with that. But I guess we don't realistically expect a lot of it here.

Pogue: 1971, the district was formed and how many referendums has Jasper passed since it took place in '71?

Huddleston: I am not aware of any that have passed. Since I've been on the board we ran a referendum to construct a middle school, probably in 1996. To my recollection, that was defeated by a two to one margin. At a later time we ran a referendum to increase the levy in the education fund and in the operation and maintenance fund. Those referendums were also defeated by about the same margins. And then after those were defeated then we went ahead and consolidated the junior highs from three down to one. We had with our project this past year, where we moved the junior high to the high school, the district sold working cash fund bonds to pay for part of that construction.

There was a petition drive put forward to try to force that to the ballot, to try stop it, but the people who were behind that were unable to gather enough signatures to do that so we were able to sell those bonds without a referendum.

Pogue: What have been some of the positive things you have seen in your years as a board member for the students here in Jasper County?

Huddleston: Just the fact that we can offer them, by having the number of students that we've got as opposed to smaller districts, we can offer them, a better curriculum. We can attract better staff and just give them a lot of opportunities: sports programs, extracurricular programs in addition to the school. You just couldn't do with smaller schools.

Pogue: When you talk about extracurricular what are some of the ones that have good student participation in?

Huddleston: We've for years had a very successful band program with good participation in the junior high and the high school in this school district. We've had good success with a lot of our sports programs: football, basketball, baseball, track, volleyball at the high school and at the junior high where those programs are. Cross country. We're just able to offer the kids a lot of opportunities.

Pogue: What are the feelings of the business community about what is being offered in Jasper County?

Huddleston: We don't have a lot of businesses in the county, unfortunately, by only having one town of any size. But the businesses we have are very supportive of our school district. Any time there's a need it seems like they always come through and provide things to help the kids.

Pogue: We've talked a little bit about the issues going on in Springfield regarding school reorganization and you've talked of Jasper being so big, probably would not be impacted by getting any bigger. But what suggestions might you give the commission that is studying the issue of reorganization based on your own experiences here in Jasper County with a large geographical area with a smaller student population?

Huddleston: I personally think there is a limit to how far you can go transporting students and still make it work. And I think here in Jasper County what we're doing is working but I would have concerns about trying to make a district any larger geographically than Jasper County. I realize in some areas of the state they have very low student numbers, very low numbers of population and they'll have some problems trying to consolidate those districts and make it work. But I would think it would be hard to make a district geographically much larger than we are and make it function properly.

Pogue: What have you seen as far as changes go in the district from 1971 to 2011?

Huddleston: Decline in population, decline in enrollment. I'm not sure what all you want for that question.

Pogue: As a board president, what are some of the challenges you face in trying to provide all the opportunities for the students here in Jasper with the finances that you are able to get locally or from the state or from federal sources?

Huddleston: Well it just gets harder, because to keep doing what we're doing because expenses just keep going up, whether it be salaries, whether it be diesel fuel for the buses, whether it be repairs for the buildings. The cost of everything keeps going up and we're levying pretty well at the max—or are at the max—on our education and operation and maintenance funds and those can't be increased. We have in the past had the benefit of having some increase in our assessed valuation but it looks like that's probably about to level off or maybe even go down so we won't even have that to help us in the future.

Pogue: So some of the financial issues have been impacted because of the Hold Harmless elimination, the major cutbacks in transportation as well as proration of state aid and then the declining enrollment. All those are factors that put pressure on you to be able to keep things going as well as you are able to do.

Huddleston: Yes and then of course with the City of Newton we have factors here where they have TIF (Tax Increment Financing) districts and tax abatements for businesses coming in, things like that where we've lost some money there or didn't get money that we could potentially get whatever the case might be. So that has affected us also.

Pogue: In kind of concluding with your role as a member of the board of education, when you had to pinpoint maybe three things that you feel the best about in your term as a board member, what would they be?

Huddleston: I think the biggest one that would be—and sometimes it is hard to see—but I really feel like through these consolidations we have brought some unity to this school district that didn't used to be there. When you had all these elementary buildings operating and three junior highs and a high school it was like you had all these separate little school districts operating under one umbrella and everybody was doing their own thing. Jealousy of somebody else because they thought one of the other schools were getting something that they weren't. Now once we've got consolidated down to what we've got you can move by those issues. We're all in it together. I'm trying to think of a couple of others to put with that. Obviously that would be the biggest accomplishment for me that I've felt.

Pogue: Are any of the buildings that were closed are they being used for any purpose or were they torn down?

Huddleston: We have found uses for about all the buildings. The ones we closed recently we closed the Willow Hills school and we leased it to the regional office of education for a safe school. Buildings that have been closed previously like the Yale and Hidalgo buildings we gave those back to the communities and they remodeled them and make them into fire houses for their communities. The old St. Marie Elementary building we gave to the SESE, the special ed co-op, and they're using it. So far we've been pretty successful at finding uses for these buildings as we've closed them but of course we still have a couple of them that we haven't dealt with yet. And we don't know where that's going to go. The board hasn't made a decision.

Pogue: I want to thank you for reviewing the history of Jasper County School District and how it was created in 1971 and some of the challenges that you are facing as a member of the board of education. Is there anything else would like to add regarding the history of Jasper County?

Huddleston: No, it's just been a great place to live and raise my family, Even though my girls don't live in the county at this time I have heard them say that they would sure like to find work so they could move back to Jasper County and send their kids to school here and have their kids be in 4-H programs and things like they had when they were growing up. So evidently it left a good impression on my kids and I think it has on a lot of the kids. I feel good about what we're doing here.

Pogue: I want to thank you Fred for explaining to us about Jasper County and its unique role in the State of Illinois, being the largest geographical square mileage unit district in the State of Illinois.

Huddleston: Thank you.

(end of interview)