

ALPL Oral History Program
Interview with Keith Bolin
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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: This is Phil Pogue. We are here on the topic of school reorganization in Walnut, Illinois. It is August 29, 2011, and we are going to be talking to Keith Bolin. At this time I will start with: Keith, would you explain to our listeners your educational family background?

Bolin: Our own family background is, I graduated high school in 1978. My wife graduated in 1980 from Manlius High School, which is now part of the Bureau Valley School System. She was born and raised in Bureau County and I was as well. Her father and my father were actually born August 19th, 1927, same day, same year, one in Knox County and one in Bureau County. And those two fellows ended up becoming neighbors within two miles of each other and both started farming around 1948 and 1950, respectively; her folks had four children, my folks had four children and so that is how we became to be neighbors and good friends and then a married couple. We are farmers by trade and the educational background is we are both high school graduates and I am presently sitting on the school board as school board chairman at Bureau Valley School District, number 340.

Pogue: Had you had any experiences with school reorganization prior to the merger of Bureau Valley?

Bolin: The only experience I had had was the one we went through. I was there at the very inception and what would have been the final inception idea in 1993 and then moved to a vote in November of 1994, but only that consolidation. I had sat in on a meeting back in 1989 of a couple of the school districts that really didn't go anywhere. It was some studies. But, no, the answer briefly would be no.

Pogue: Could you give us some background of the history of the various districts, the past efforts at reorganization, number of students, schools, square miles? You had Manlius 305, Western 306, Wyant Elementary 126, Wyant High School 510, Walnut Elementary 285, and Walnut High School at number 508.

Bolin: One thing that is very easy to remember is the number of the school district, number 340, which came into being in the spring of 1995. The election was in November of 1994 to consolidate and to issue bonds. Two votes: yes, yes or it could have been a no, no or yes, no; one to consolidate and then one to pass the bonds. In the spring of 1995 we found out the number of the district was number 340, which is the square miles of the school district, coincidentally, I believe. That is the square miles and the history you would have to ask somebody else probably better qualified than me on the history on how many attempts there had been. But I have heard from previous board members that were much older than me, some who have passed away now, that, you know, we tried this before. We talked about doing X, Y and Z before. We talked to maybe Tampico or they talked to Annawan who didn't become part of Bureau Valley and they were not party to the talks in '93 and '94 and one of those districts has since merged with a neighboring district to the northwest, Prophetstown.

But there is nothing new under the sun, I do believe that. I mean, we bring back ideas that maybe have failed before and I think that is what happened in 1993; I think the stars were aligned and I believe the school boards – there were six separate school boards that were involved here – and it seemed pretty universal that the boards agreed this needed to be done. A group of teachers in May of 1993 sent a letter of support for consolidation that we needed to look at this for the good of the students in what became 340 square miles.

Pogue: Now what communities would have made up Western?

Bolin: Buda and Sheffield and my understanding is in 1962, those two districts consolidated. Junior high kids went one direction. The high school kids went the other direction. They basically kept their buildings open as best I am aware of. But that merger happened in 1962 between Buda and Sheffield to become Buda Western. When they went to the state tournaments in the 1970's, they called it Buda Western by mistake and that

was always a pretty funny faux pas but the locals to say, are you from Buda or are you from Buda. And so it is Buda Western.

Pogue: Wyanet and Walnut had two different school districts and both are very small communities.

Bolin: Yes.

Pogue: Did that present any unique challenges?

Bolin: Yes. There were six districts, four real core communities: Wyanet having two districts, Walnut having two districts, dual districts. They both had separate superintendents and I believe Wyanet might have shared. Wyanet was sharing a superintendent. Walnut had two superintendents. But what opened a door when we started the consolidation talks in 1993, is a common set of goals and what came into play, is the desire of the body to have a K12 district, a unit district, or to have a dual district, one large high school district and one large elementary district. I can remember the night very well the set of goals: fiscally responsible, an attendance center in every district after the consolidation. And the other one was a unit district. And that goal was voted on a three to two vote. That was a common goal. That was a little sticking point the one night. And our group, I remember at our table was very mixed. There were some who wanted a guarantee an elementary would retain in the town of Manlius or in the town of Walnut. They wanted that guarantee and that dual district was one method they saw as trying to guarantee an elementary would stay located there. We eventually went on a three to two vote to a unit district which is, everyone will say, more efficient than two dual districts.

Pogue: Manlius prior to the merger had how many different school buildings?

Bolin: Manlius would have had one location. It would have had a 1922 to 1925 high school building. It would have had a 1958 elementary and junior high building with an addition added on in 1966 which was the cafeteria. Before that they never had a cafeteria. And three new classrooms and a teacher's lounge. So, three different times of construction but all in one location all attached together.

Pogue: And what about Western?

Bolin: Western would have had the Sheffield building, one building, which was their old high school which just got tore down in the last six months, just demolished. It was vacated on a split vote, four to three because it was an attendance center, K-5 and then it went to a grade sitting building. But we shut it down in 2006, on a four to three vote. Very contentious item. So Sheffield had a building and Buda had a building with a west tower and east tower and a modern gymnasium in between.

Pogue: And Walnut, because they were dual districts had an elementary building in one site and a high school in another?

Bolin: Correct.

Pogue: And what about Wyanet?

Bolin: Wyanet had elementary and then right across the driveway was the unattached high school. So they were next to each other but not attached at Wyanet. And Walnut was interesting; one note to denote to you, is Walnut always had their high school up on top of the hill. It was a beautiful old 1920s building, I believe. That was not going to be occupied, so that was demolished after consolidation; everybody knew that was coming. But what was interesting is the high school never had a cafeteria in the old high school. The high school never had a hot lunch unless they walked down to the junior high which was a fair little walk. I think that is an interesting point.

Pogue: Had these districts worked together in any fashion prior to the discussion in 1993?

Bolin: There was in spring of 1993; there was an agreement made between the two superintendents, Bill Mattingly of Walnut and Daryl McManus at Manlius, to co-op the agriculture class for the 1993-94 school year. That was a very contentious issue that the public found out about, very contentious issue, but was followed through with; it might have been in the spring of '94, let me think on that a minute. But that agriculture class right ahead of consolidation was co-op Walnut with Manlius. Wyanet and Depue had done some co-oping. Wyanet and Western might have had a co-oping football team. Wyanet, Depue and Western, yes. Wyanet, Depue and Western did a football co-op. And that helped in the consolidation discussions.

Pogue: Were these six districts in similar co-ops, like special education or community college?

Bolin: A little difference in the community college. I think Western might have had more of a relationship with Blackhawk. I can't remember that. One of them worked with the Whiteside area vocational center, you know, for automotive classes and one had a relationship with LaSalle Peru automotive. So there was a little difference there. Did I answer the other part, Phil, there?

Pogue: Yes. Who promoted the discussion in 1993 that suddenly brought these districts that maybe you had indicated hadn't had much in common?

Bolin: Well, you know, I want to be very careful on this because I am sure there are things that people know that I don't know. But I sat in on almost

every meeting, I mean, from the very beginning of this process. Obviously the teachers will tell you, we wrote a letter in May of 1993. They will state that and that they started the process. The school board at Manlius, Duane Blackert who ended up being the first president of the Bureau Valley School board, and Leonard Hansen, who was the president of the school board at Manlius, he had always opposed consolidation. But Leonard had come to a point after 22 years realizing things had changed, economics had changed and a need for consolidation or some type of merger. And Leonard and Duane worked together to come up with a plan of Manlius hosting this, or Manlius hosting this; it was an idea that was kind of dead on arrival.

Western came to the meeting. Wyonet board came to the meeting. Walnut maybe came to the meeting. I was at the meeting as an outsider. I was sitting in the audience and there was some angry parents: "How dare these folks do this." I mean, there was some real angry people, maybe a dozen. And this proposal got put out and I am going to say that was the month of April of 1993. Okay. And it was contentious. He had the letter of May of '93 by the teachers. What then happened, the Western school board at the hands of Mike Mercer who was the superintendent, in June of 1993, I believe, sent Bob Elliott, who was not on the school board, as their representative in support of a group of people coming together at a meeting in August to say these are the parties that are going to come together. There would be an invitation sent out to all the neighboring schools. We would like to come to a meeting, form a group to investigate possible consolidation.

That was a very contentious meeting with probably 80 to a 100 people in the room in the Walnut Elementary cafeteria. The room was full. And it got very contentious. Bob Elliott took a pounding from – I remember Bill Mattingly was the Walnut superintendent and there was some comments made back and forth. But that Western board had some vision. They sent somebody who was not a board member, who was an outsider by trade, Bob Elliott, hog farmer, University of Illinois graduate. I don't think Bob had ever got a B in his life. I think a straight A student, just smart as heck. And Bob went up there and was very politically correct, non-confrontational, and he was attacked at every point he had asked or request for. Got everything he wanted and got the ball rolling that night, but he got hammered. But he took it well and it was a fascinating meeting to sit there and watch.

I had known Bob as a kid, showed hogs; I didn't know him personally real well, but I knew the family. Our parents were friends but I didn't know Bob well. And it was fascinating watching him work. It was fascinating watching the dynamics in the room. It was a great meeting. And on or about September 1, 1993, the first meeting took place, which was the beginning of the committee of twenty, not a legal body but a

grassroots body. I think that we started correctly. We didn't go into a political "he said, she said" and a political fight; the school boards aren't doing the right job, the administrators aren't doing the right job, parents aren't doing the right job, the kids; it wasn't us against them. It was "What can we do better?"

The invitations were sent out and it came in, the people who attended were what became Bureau Valley. Tiskwilwa was invited; they did not go. Tampico was invited; they did not come. The attendees were Walnut, Wyanet, Manlius and Western. Those are the ones that came to that meeting. Then they set up the ground rules and what was fascinating about it was you had one vote. Walnut had one vote. Wyanet had one vote, even though they had two separate boards. Western had one vote and Manlius had one vote. Equal votes. But what you had to really make the boards non-confrontational were this grassroots, and it was truly grassroots driven. That was the inspiring thing is you had –I believe it was – three board members. Each body had five members who had one vote at a meeting, but there were five guys sitting there, or gals. And those five people had one vote. And Wyanet would have maybe two board members and then maybe a third board member and then two grassroots people that were outside education, parents, somebody, business leader, but it was usually parents. So, your one vote was a group committee at your table of five people coming together with the one vote.

That was the committee of twenty and they started off on common threads of philosophy of what are the goals here: fiscal responsibility, an attendance center in each district. If Wyanet had two buildings, they wanted to be assured of one building. Because there had to be some buildings shut to have savings. Everybody knew that, but they wanted to retain an attendance center of some kind within Western, within Manlius, within Walnut and within Wyanet. That was a goal. Unit, and it was a K12 district and that was a contentious fight but it passed. It did pass. It must have been a three to one vote. I would have to re-think that. There are minutes to document these somewhere.

There was thought to pay the chairman money for phone calls and travel. The chairman ended up becoming Bob Elliott and Bob Elliott said no, we do not do that. That person has to work without getting a dime of reimbursement; otherwise, he becomes a target which was a very smart move. And we kept the leadership out of control of any board. Nobody in the leadership should be a board member. Then by October we had reports of every group could tap into two or three other parents or other people that come onto a committee –we had a transportation committee, we had a tax committee, we had a curriculum committee. And they came up with some reports over the next months; every month they had a report issued. So there was somebody busy. They weren't idle hands because idle hands cause trouble. So there were reports coming back, and it was a busy time.

Then by October or November they moved from the Committee of Twenty into a legal body of the Committee of Ten. Leaders had kind of emerged and then the Committee of Ten became formed. And this may be is more information than you need, Phil, but there was a real push by administrators specifically to move this to March or April election of 1994. Had that happened it would have failed. We said, no, we need more information and we need more public relations. Once we figure out what the facts are, we need more time to sell it and build our army of people to sell it. And we said, no, we are going to hold this vote off for a year until November 1994 and that was a smart decision, another fork in the road, not to try to push this upon the people too fast, too hard. A lot of great leaders doing a lot of good work, I mean, in every community, in every way. More than you needed there, Phil.

Pogue: What seemed to trigger the need for the six districts to merge? Was it financial, building conditions, curriculum?

Bolin: I would say Walnut and Manlius were financial, all but broke. I think we were issuing bonds, I mean tax anticipation warrants, so we were falling behind on what I call the feed bill, you know, on the day-to-day operations. Walnut had issued a half million dollars in debt bonds and they couldn't use the bond money. I forget what kind of bond it was. And the only way they could use the money, they could use the interest income from the debt for education. But they couldn't use the original bond. That bond ended up staying with Walnut, isolated to the town of Walnut. We did not have to assume that debt by law and we didn't. They had to pay that off over the next two or three years, the Walnut folks did. So they had a different tax rate than any of us did. But bottom line it was financial. It was just financial. You had fewer kids. Tax base wasn't growing probably real fast. I would have to go back and look at that but I was finance chairman for years at Bureau Valley, now I am the board chairman and finance is what I enjoy but it just wasn't enough of a tax base for all those administrators. And when you have two or three or four kids in an advanced sociology class or advanced math class or advanced English, it just wasn't fiscally responsible.

Pogue: Were there any other considerations other than consolidation of merging the districts?

Bolin: Yeah. Wyanet really had another issue. They had a non-binding referendum in the spring of '94, I believe it was, to annex is the word I will use. It was a non-binding referendum though, to go to Princeton. They turned it down by about 13 to 25 votes. And there was a lot of chaos on our southern southeast borders. Tiskilwa was going through some possible annexation to Princeton. They were in some trouble. Nobody wanted to be like Tiskilwa. There was a lot of confusion, some legal issues. The anti-consolidation folks had hired on an attorney to fight Princeton and to fight

the board. Tampico was going through a potential annexation consolidation with Prophetstown, a much bigger town. And nobody wanted to be like Tampico to our north or Tiskilwa to our south. We had images daily in the paper of the trouble in Tampico or the trouble in Tiskilwa that really helped keep anybody from really wanting to get into, what I call to become a dysfunctional family with what became Bureau Valley. It really worked to our advantage, the chaos that was to our north and south borders. It worked to our extreme advantage.

Pogue: Were there any legal obstacles that had to be dealt with having dual and high school and unit districts?

Bolin: Yes, there were, Phil. We had to basically hand over land to; I believe it was Mountmorency Grade School. It was not contiguous on the Walnut High School and elementary so we had to give up tax base to our north. Not very significant at all. And then we had one issue in Wyanet with one farmer, I think Chuck Read, wanted to go to Princeton. We ended up letting him go to make the borders contiguous and I think he was going to fight a legal battle because he wanted his child or children to go to Princeton and not to stay in Wyanet. Nothing real hard or heavy handed at all.

Pogue: Were there any feasibility studies done regarding these six districts?

Bolin: Yes. I mean that is what we did for that year. If you started September one, you know, you had fourteen months; we hired Dr. Harold Ford who was the superintendent at Geneseo school district. I think we paid him \$2000 for consulting us on setting a tax rate, what it would cost us, you know, for setting our bonds. The best \$2000 Bureau Valley ever spent before they had a name or a number was hiring Harold Ford. Great guy.

Pogue: What did the study conclude about the proposed merger of the districts?

Bolin: That we could add curriculum, better opportunities. That was a selling point to the parents, to the grassroots. We could do better. We could be more efficient. Your kids won't ride over an hour. That was a philosophy in one way, all bus rides would be under an hour. That was a concern. How long are my kids going to be on a school bus? The feasibility study which were several reports given by the Committee of Twenty and then gone deeper into by the Committee of Ten. I mean, they did a lot of homework and I was not on the Committee of Ten; I was on the Committee of Twenty. I was on the school board by that time in late '93. I did not want to be on the Committee of Ten. I thought it should be grassroots and they did a lot of feasibility as far as what our tax rates were going to be. What is it going to cost us to build a high school? What is the real cost of the high school? How many dollars in bonds? The approximate interest rate. What is it going to cost to operate a new school district?

You know, the big issue was, we had all the districts had to go to the highest pay scale which was Walnut High School pay. And, thank God, we did not have to go to the highest insurance rate coverage because that was Walnut Elementary which they had doubled the insurance and given an annuity the previous year. That would have caused us \$1000 a teacher to \$1500 a teacher, to \$2000. That scared the heck out of us on the taxation committee and on the finances. And that was a big selling point for the teachers. They knew they were all going to get a raise. Almost all of them. So that was an easy sell to the teachers in the sense they are going to get a raise. And so that was a good thing. And obviously they believed in their core anyway – without the raise – that this was best for the children, the future children, the unborn children, for decades to come.

Pogue: So the Committee of Ten was organized. How they were divided among the six entities?

Bolin: Yeah. It was three at Walnut, three at Western, two at Wyanet and two at Manlius. That is how the representation was divided. It was approximately on population, roughly. The other thing that reflected later on what became Bureau Valley is – and this was a super sensitive issue – of how we are going to be represented. We don't want to be dominated. Nobody wanted to be dominated. And that festered into the feasibility that we just talked about, was we drew the lines in to seven equal population bases in what became Bureau Valley. We hired Nash, Nash and Bean out of Geneseo. I guess we hired them. I guess would be the right word. But we drew lines there of seven equal population bases so no community could dominate their elected officials. In other words, Manlius would always have an elected official theoretically. Wyanet, Western and Walnut had seven equal population. It is not the top vote getters. You see what I mean. We were districted out and I think that is somewhat unique in Illinois, somewhat unique.

Pogue: When was the decision then made to run referendum in November?

Bolin: When was the decision? I think late '93. It was made that we would not push this to the spring of '94. There was too much work to be done, and realize these people all had jobs, all volunteers. And then we pushed administrators to be our resource tools; say, can you get how many dollars we are spending on X, Y and Z. Those folks still had their jobs to do where they were at, and then we were pushing administrators to get us information on how many teachers we would need, curriculum, and I would say that decision was made in late '93 to run this for November '94.

Pogue: What was the role of each board for that referendum?

Bolin: You know, I can't remember. There came a point, like when we had to hire Harold Ford. I can't remember because the Committee of Twenty and the

Committee of Ten had no budget. There came a point where we needed \$2000. I don't know if we spent \$10,000 for the consolidation effort or if it got to be \$20,000. LZT out of Peoria was the architect that was hired to do the building, the model. We felt we needed something physical to show the public, you know, rather than words on a piece of paper. This is your curriculum. This is your tax rate. This is how many buses we will need. These were all words on a piece of paper. But we needed to physically have something to show them that was tangible. They could actually touch it very gently. And that was a model of the new high school. And that had a cost to it and I don't remember what the cost was. But we needed money to authorize it and the six boards authorized payment, I believe for Harold Ford. I could be wrong on that and then for the model from LZT. They are to this day still the architect that is employed by Bureau Valley. They did that modeling at cost. I mean they didn't make any money; they hoped this would pass and that we would hire them. But there were no guarantees of that. So, yes, the old board's role was really to help us fund some of the information which was minimal cost. It wasn't very much. And then we had to figure out what board would pay what percentage. So you had forty two board members. Most of these votes were passed 38 to 4. There was a couple on Wyanet board that didn't want this to go forward but, in general, people were willing to support spending a few dollars that were minimal dollars to their budgets.

Pogue: So for the referendum then all six boards majority were in favor of the ...

Bolin: Of doing something?

Pogue: Yes.

Bolin: They were in favor ... you might vote to spend this \$2000 or \$4000 or \$10,000 out of your budget even if you said, Ok, I may not support this but I will vote to support spending the money to do the study to see what they come up with. You might have had some people who voted to fund those few items who might not have been personally in support of it but they saw the overall good of the studies and advancing this.

The referendum did pass eventually by 61 or 63% with no organized opposition. There were some buttons that ran around, vote yes no, vote no no. There were some that wanted the consolidation to pass and then not the bond issue to pass and that agenda was to keep their high school open. They figured they would be the winner on the location of the high school as opposed to it being centrally located. That was the other one of the philosophies was that a new central high school would be built. It was never discussed where central was. We didn't need to state the obvious where the X marked the spot of the center of the high school. The high school is within a mile of that X. But it was never talked about where this would be in great detail. It was very careful not to have a philosophy: we

are picking Walnut or Manlius or Manlius over Western or Wyanet over Buda. It was a philosophy, fiscal responsibility, an attendance center in every district, a brand new built, centrally located high school in the center of the district. That was the philosophy. It wasn't saying we are picking a location here. It was a philosophy.

- Pogue: You indicated you had a lot of activity and support from citizens with the committee of twenty and then bringing more in. Was there a lot of citizen activity during the referendum campaign?
- Bolin: Yes, massive. I won't say hundreds but well over a hundred people, I think, at a meeting. They called it the BEST Committee, I believe it was called: Better Education for Students of Tomorrow, I believe was the acronym.
- Pogue: And you indicated, that the staff were in favor of this from the beginning.
- Bolin: Your teachers were definitely, I would say. There was ninety or a hundred signatures on that of teachers. And there were probably a hundred and twenty teachers at that time or a hundred and ten in those districts. I am guessing. So, yes, it was overwhelmingly supported by the teachers. And the public had yet to be educated on what the issues were, you know. The building looked fine; it's still the same old building. The building looks fine from the outside. You know, there are still kids going into the building and coming out of the building. They seem safe. But the committee of twenty under Bob Elliott's leadership: Bob Elliott was the chairman of the Committee of Twenty; Bob Elliott was the chairman of the Committee of Ten. We were careful at his leadership, and others, to not attack the system that was there presently. We never, ever, ever, ever attacked the teachers, the administrators, the taxpayers of the present day or the parents of the kids. We said, what can we do better?
- Pogue: Selling points for the referendum then was focus for getting ready for the twenty-first century?
- Bolin: I don't know if it was all that high falluting. ...we have got some lacking in, you know, computers were getting to be an issue. Our population bases were decreasing. Things were changing. Agriculture was changing, still continues to change. I think it was what we were **for**, not what we were against. And we got the public to buy in to being **for** something. You have to realize there are land mines out there. What is going to be the name of the school? What are going to be the colors of that school? We have blue at this school. We have green at this school. We have purple at this school. Are they going to be same colors? That was a land mine. Other land mines were transportation. Transportation was a huge land mine: I don't want my first grader being riding the bus. The other land mine was the attendance center issue. People had to be reassured that they were going to retain a building and until 2006, they all have retained a building, except now

Sheffield, which is probably the most vibrant community and they no longer have a building. That has put a marker that has put a dark note on our consolidation efforts eleven years later, and that is a negative that is one of the few; no, the only, goals of the committee of ten and the school board that we haven't lived up to was retaining an attendance center in every community.

Pogue: Were there any other significant opposition? You indicated there was no formal concern.

Bolin: No, they never organized. There was never a group that said, let's go meet at Bob's house or let's go meet at John's house or Sarah's house and organize an opposition. Tiskilwa had that. Had an opposition crew called SOS, Save Our Schools. I don't think anybody wanted to be like the neighboring districts so they never had an organized opposition. And I think there were two communities they believed would not ever pass. They never believed Walnut would pass it. There was a thought that Wyanet would never pass it, because Wyanet could go six miles straight of the big beautiful town of Princeton, the county seat, and do nothing and just annex right on into it. They didn't have to go through this vote. They didn't have to go through all this effort. The people in Walnut said Wyanet will never pass it, and the people in Wyanet said Walnut will never pass it. Oh by the way, they both passed it. So, I think, somebody thought somebody was going to put a roadblock in and nobody did. And the worst we ever saw were buttons that said No No or Yes No. Yes consolidation. No on the bonds. Or no on consolidation, no on the bonds. So, a few buttons. That is it.

Pogue: Did the local media have any position on this consolidation vote?

Bolin: In the fourteen, fifteen months—sixteen months if you add the committee of twenty's timeframe—we only had one negative article in the paper which was whether or not these people could afford to build such a building. It was the only negative article we had that we perceived as negative. I won't say they supported it. They reported it and not a lot of negativity in it. I think even they could see things in western Bureau County had been deteriorating and one or two of those reporters were from the western side of the county.

Pogue: The referendum was passed in November and then the new district would take over, would be July of '95?

Bolin: Correct.

Pogue: So there had to be a lot of issues dealt with and how did those six boards work to deal with that?

Bolin: On December 7th, the election was in, I think, November 2nd or 3rd or 4th, I can't remember. The election and on December 7, 1994 they had an

interim board meeting. The different boards had sent their delegates to be an interim board. I don't know. Wyanet sent, I know one of their board chairmen was there, and I think the other was a board chairman. But there were, I believe, eight interim board members. Duane Blackert was our board president at that time. He represented Manlius and then I represented Manlius. Then Western had two board members. Walnut two. So I think all four, yeah, the four districts sent eight. I think Wyanet would have sent one from each high school and elementary board. Walnut did that. Wyanet did that and then Western sent two and Manlius sent two.

We had no legal authority. What we did is we took action, moved through what were the biggest agenda item was what are we going to do during the interim while we are building the building. That had been an issue that had been left alone by the committee of ten, purposely left alone. What do you do while you are building the high school? What do you do with those high school kids: you going to keep them in four separate high schools?; you going to move them into three, two or one? And that was a vote loser. The Committee of Ten leadership had realized that was a vote loser. What do you do during the interim? Because in the big scheme of things one, two or three years as an interim over the life of a building of eighty or a hundred years isn't a big issue, so they left that to the interim board which I was on. And it was a hot-blooded contentious item. We had death threats actually on that issue. That issue got to be the issue. It was very contentious. And what we did is we hired a consultant of what to do. We were going to move to maybe have them all come to the old Manlius high school and elementary and then farm out our elementary and junior high kids to the other districts and get all those high school kids together immediately. The one neighboring district to the north, Walnut, absolutely opposed that in their population, opposed that. They did not want to go to Manlius. There is an old rivalry issue there. We hired an outside consultant for a couple of thousand from near Chicago. Had no ability to pay him. He said, If I get paid July one, that will be good enough, by the new board. Okay.

Came up with a compromise and what we came up with by March was that we would during the interim, which ended up being three years, the high school kids all went to Buda. And that building was full with four hundred and some odd kids in it those first three years. With minimal expenses and two temporary portable classrooms, that is where the kids went for three years while the building was being constructed. And that was the only real contentious issue.

We also addressed what is the number of the district and we also addressed getting moving on, how many administrators and what the structure of the district was going to look like. And then the new board was elected in April of '95 and then we, the interim board, which had no legal authority of any real kind, we backed away after April 1 and the newly

elected Bureau Valley Board of Education took over in April. Again, they had no legal authority until July 1. Then they enacted some of the things that we had done in December, January, February and March. And we had done that all and everybody was communicating.

The communication was intense, overlapping and it was really a good time to be watching things as a lot of people working together. There was a lot of good stuff coming together. What do you do during the interim was the only real contentious issue during the whole process. It was very contentious, what to do. Other than that, the name of the school ... that was another thing that what is the name of the school. There were write-ins. We set up a committee for the name of the school, Bureau Valley, Bureau Ridge. There were all kinds of names. Colors. And the kids were very involved. Terry Gutshall, who was the first principal at the high school, later became a superintendent years later, just retiring a year and a half ago as a superintendent of Bureau Valley. He helped organize a big old party and there was some great stuff that you got to really see why we did it, which was for the kids and for the future of the kids that weren't even born. The best thing parents can do and leaders can do sometimes is shut up, listen, watch and realize it is bigger than any one individual. It was probably one the things I will look back in my life and say I am glad I was involved in it, because it was a lot of good people doing grassroots initiative with minimal amount of politics. There were a minimal amount of politics being played. We kept the boards of educations during the grassroots initiatives of '93 and '94. They kept their hands off. In general, they kept their hands off. We used their administrators as resource tools and they tried very hard not to be political and vying for a job in the new school districts. It would sometimes seep out but it was a fun time to be a part of education. I sat on a school board since '97, the old school district of '93 at Manlius and then on the new one in '97. And sometimes the politics get frustrating. It was truly as close to a pure grassroots initiative as I have been around. Really, really fascinating.

Pogue: So, to kind of repeat then, on your election in November you had the question of whether the districts would consolidate. You had the question of selling bonds. And was that also the time you had how the board members would be selected by attendance.

Bolin: By regions?

Pogue: Population?

Bolin: I can't remember. Do you know, Phil? Have you looked that up? I can't remember if that was on the November '94 election, sitting here.

Pogue: Well, we can do some research on that. Then in December the interim board started to meet without legal authority?

- Bolin: Right.
- Pogue: And none of the eight were on any of the current boards.
- Bolin: Yes. Those eight interim board members for what would become Bureau Valley were all elected officials.
- Pogue: Okay.
- Bolin: They were all elected. They had to be. But they came two from Wyanet, two from Western, two from Manlius, two from Walnut; one from each of the dual districts. But technically anything we did could be undone by what was going to be the new board elected in April of '95 and then they would have been seated on July 1, 1995.
- Pogue: Did the interim board from December to April ...
- Bolin: About April 1, April 5th.
- Pogue: ...have a list of things that you were trying to accomplish?
- Bolin: Yes. The interim ... how we were going to, you know, where we were going to put the high school children during the interim. And we were looking to the leadership of who was going to be on the new board, also. There were eight board members sitting there, eight old board members, what you call the old district. But we were also communicating on who were going to be the candidates of the new school and the promises that had been made in the November '94 election. People had expectations. And the only one that was never addressed – and there were questions about it during some of the public meetings – you know, what are you going to do while you're building it? You know, we will have to come up with a plan. The board will have to come up with a plan. And that was an issue that was left alone, but we were trying to figure how many administrators were going to be needed from December to April. The name of the school was a big one. The name of the school was a big one and what we were going to do ... that took up the bulk of our time.

There were a couple other committees and I was involved heavily with the interim that was the committee I was on. And I think sport scheduling was another committee. That was a big issue on December 7th, our first night, because we knew we were behind the eight-ball on the football season because all the other schools in the area had already scheduled their football season. And that was a little bit of a contentious item as I remember. One of the districts had already scheduled their football season. And everybody had agreed in this consolidation: if it passes, we do not want you scheduling football season with somebody. You had the old Walnut LaMoille Co-Op and they had scheduled football games and all of a sudden, three of the four schools are not on that team. So, that was an interim issue

and basically we said we are not going to have kids in the classroom during the day competing on a football field in opposition to those kids. So, that was a little bit of a contentious issue that we got over very quickly. We just said, this is one school; we are going to have one football team. We are not going to have three. Because that was a potential. The kids would be playing against each other at night, so it quickly was solved: one team.

Pogue: When schools merge you have issues of creating a unified salary schedule, teacher contracts, teacher assignment, number of teachers to be kept, game colors, mascots, conference affiliations, sports you are going to offer, transportation, curriculum offerings, support staff hiring. What do you do with the old pictures, trophies, uniforms, text book issues, board policies, activity funds, who's going to be the depository for banks; how did all that get handled?

Bolin: It did. And I was a party to it. I ran for election for the new board and lost by one vote to a good friend of mine. He and I ran against each other. Beings I was a loser, I was in charge of the trophies and class pictures for Manlius and then somebody else from Western did the same and we took those all out of the different buildings and they were moved to a town hall to a community center. But the old class photos and trophies were all removed from all the buildings. That was very essential. That was an issue for some people. This was a new district. And what were the others? Depositories; that was pretty easily satisfied. The curriculum: basically we agreed, the Committee of Ten, that we go to the highest base salary schedule. That was agreed upon before the election. New board, the interim board, everybody, there was no disagreement. We would go to the highest pay scale which happened to be Walnut High School. Everybody knew that. We set the tax rate knowing that. That was very important that we knew we couldn't go to a compromise schedule because that would affect the tax rate and we factored that in.

Pogue: As to the tax rate itself, did that increase in the six areas, or some went up, some went down?

Bolin: Western was around four fourteen. Manlius was around five. Wyanet was around five dollars and ten cents. Walnut was in the mid sixes. They were in trouble. Walnut was the only district taxes went down. The other three districts, Wyanet district, Manlius district, Western district, went higher. We were in the low five's or high four's. Wyanet was just five dollars, ten cents. Western was very low, like I say, four fourteen. Western had the most curriculum, had the lowest tax rate and it wasn't an issue with the Western voters, which was amazing. So three of four raised taxes. One of the four, Walnut, lowered taxes significantly. We were in the mid fives is where we set the tax rate at.

Pogue: Were there any areas still undetermined when school began in the new district?

Bolin: Well, I was not on the first board. Duane Blackert, good friend of mine, beat me and became the board president. And I will tell you, Duane Blackert worked hard that year and a half. He came to me and asked me to run then. He got off after a year and a half. He was in that building every day working with the superintendent. It was a new business. And he told me, Keith, this is like starting a whole new business. You got a whole new set of policies. New textbooks. New teachers. New jerseys. Plus they were building a building and had to agree on the building floor plans. What is in, what is out. And there were a lot of issues they were covering. They were having board meetings every fifteen days, two a month, and they had committee meetings anywhere from two to five in between every board meeting. These guys were meeting; we're talking almost daily, these seven board members. I was not on there as I say. That first board in that first year and a half, before I got on, was working unbelievably. Not micromanaging.

You had to realize everybody had work to do. I mean those superintendents, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent who was also the transportation guy, he had to set up shuttle buses, busing schedules for 340 square miles. It was fascinating to watch. It was fascinating to watch those guys and they were doing yeoman work. There were seven men and women on that first school board, and they were hands on. And they were all, what I call, grassroots people. Duane had been the board president at Manlius. Shelly had been on the board at Wyanet. Dave Hahne had been on the board at Western and Carol Yandel had been on the board. You had two or three board members who had not been on the board of education and it was fascinating to watch them work. There were a lot of issues they had resolved; the politically charged issues, they had resolved. We had tried to resolve them for them and then when they came into being on July 1, then what they did is they re-enacted all the interim board decisions that had been made, they enacted them. And what they did is they enacted a lot of those in from April 5th, when they were elected to June 30th. They had made some decisions and then they re-affirmed those decisions once they had true legal constitutional authority by the general assembly. And, uh, I have never seen a board work so hard in that first board. They just had a lot to do.

Pogue: So when the district was open then in July '95, Manlius then would have one elementary?

Bolin: K5 building at the elementary and then the high school would be demolished at some point.

Pogue: And there were going to be an elementary in Sheffield?

Bolin: K5 in Sheffield.

Pogue: And high school in Buda?

Bolin: And the high school was used as the interim for three years, so it had nine through twelve and it was full.

Pogue: And then Wyanet would keep an elementary?

Bolin: It would have a K5 in the elementary building and then the high school was leased for an alternative school and there were thirty or forty kids in the alternative school there.

Pogue: And then Walnut would have an elementary?

Bolin: Walnut would have a K8, now how did we do that. We had a K8 there. They still retain a K8, the only building that had a K8. I tell you what we did is for the first three years. Correct me if you want to correct this. The Wyanet High School was a junior high for the first three years. I had forgotten that. Hadn't thought about that in years. So Wyanet had a K5 in the elementary and they had a six through eight in the Wyanet High School while we were building the building. And then after they left we turned that in to the alternative school for nine or twelve school districts.

Pogue: So the new construction was both high school and junior high?

Bolin: The new construction – the bond issue –, and that was pretty critical, was for the new central high school outside of Manlius in a cornfield. And the other, about \$800,000 addition at Walnut, was very political. That was a new band wing, art room that they hadn't had. And there were air conditioned rooms and that was a short million dollars. The bond issue was \$11, 995,000 and a short million of that was at Walnut. And that was kind of political to make.

Pogue: How helpful was the state board of education or your local legislators of the regional office with this reorganization?

Bolin: I think Larry Marsh came as our regional office education guy and made the statement to the teachers in the cafeteria at Manlius. They all said, you realize you will all be pink slipped. And the teachers didn't realize that apparently, and we thought that might have killed the consolidation effort right then and there, but it wasn't a very good political way to tell the teachers. They almost visibly gasped, Oh my gosh! State Board of Education – I can't remember well enough to probably comment too much on. I am sure they were very helpful in some form.

Pogue: Since 1995, how has the merger gone?

Bolin: I would say just about flawless other than when we shut the Sheffield elementary and have since demolished it. And the thing that brings people together, whether you like it or not is not necessarily the English classroom, but it is the football field, the basketball, the cross country – which we never had. And our football program has been excellent and basketball program has been very successful, regional champs many, many years in a row under Brad Bickett, the new gymnasium there. Then we built a new football field eventually there has brought the communities, plural, moving to a single community called Bureau Valley and I think we are finally past the point where our kids are now Bureau Valley kids. They are not former Walnut or former Manlius. They are Bureau Valley kids. And the teachers are no longer former Walnut teachers or Manlius teachers. In another ten or fifteen years we will be purely to a point where they were all Bureau Valley teachers.

Pogue: Were there any unanticipated problems that cropped up or developed shortly after the merger?

Bolin: We had one big one that popped up late December. A phone call I got that we had, by law under the school code, you cannot levy more than 13.8% of your tax base for bonds. We mistakenly had gone over our debt limit ceiling and that was quite a Christmas or post-Christmas New Years. And what the general assembly did for us through lobbying efforts of the interim board a little bit and the former leadership of the Committee of Ten, is we had the general assembly on their veto session – I think it was the last vote of the day in the last day of the veto session – voted the Bureau Valley law, which was any school district that had passed their referendum by 61% or 62% or over could exceed their debt limit in a one time deal. It was called kind of the Bureau Valley law. We had gone over. We did not realize it. Had that law not passed on that day, we could not have issued those bonds at that amount for 11.995. We would have had to cut back somewhere – classrooms, auditorium—somewhere where we would not have wanted to cut back at.

Pogue: What seemed to help to merge the student body? They were all together over at Buda. You mentioned the success of the sports teams and getting everybody together. Anything else that seemed to work to bring

Bolin: Well, Terry Gutshall was the principal down at Western and I think to unveil would have been ... let's see we started in '95-'96 school year but in late '95 at the end of the school (year), I think he brought all the kids together and announced to the public, to the media, at Buda with all the kids present – I believe this is how it is – the name of the school district and the colors and it was kind of like a Chicago Bulls type deal with the music and the fog and spotlight and it was theirs. And the kids had the input on the name and colors, so it was theirs. They owned it.

- Pogue: What state incentives did the district qualify for?
- Bolin: Three years, we got three years; I think they backed that off later on. I think they tried to back it off during our process, but we held them to the three years, and what they figured, \$3,000 or \$4,000 per certified teacher for three years. Does that sound right, Phil?
- Pogue: Uh-hmm.
- Bolin: And we retained all three years and those were extremely helpful.
- Pogue: You had salary adjustments.
- Bolin: Yes. We needed that money for those salary adjustments. We did retain one year, the third and final year we retained that in to the bank account. We didn't use that. We retained that in reserves.
- Pogue: And were any districts helped with debt dealing? Were there any debt?
- Bolin: There would have been ... the debt for Walnut stayed with Walnut. That was a bond deal. Manlius might have bought a bus that got paid for. There were a few of those but Western, I don't believe, had any debt. I don't believe Wyanet did.
- Pogue: Have there been any discussion with other districts joining Bureau Valley since your merger?
- Bolin: No. The only thing we have said to, like Annawan to our west or Ohio to our northeast or Bradford to our south, any time we want to look at co-oping of academics we are open to that. You know, if they struggle with something or we struggle with something, you know, let's look at it. I don't care if it's food service, accounting measures we do, the only thing we did have that is kind of a side issue in May 2001: we signed a governmental agreement with Bradford and they deactivated their high school and we take up to one third or more of their deactivated high school students in to Bureau Valley. We did the same for a few years with Neponset until they cut a separate singular deal with Kewanee and as of two years ago, we don't get any of the Neponset children. That is no real talk of annexations or consolidations at all, but we do take deactivated high school students out of Bradford.
- Pogue: What were some of the additional courses that you were able to put in because of the merger that you didn't have before?
- Bolin: One thing we put in a very good cafeteria and the Walnut High School kids now had a hot lunch program. On the curriculum side, we had advanced classes that were being, I think, right out of the block were offered every year which was not being done anywhere. We had art. I think the first year

of music there were seventy or eighty some kids in the band program, out on the marching band, I am talking marching band. We didn't have that many students at Manlius, when we consolidated. So, we had one out of four kids was in the marching band program, and that was exciting to see. We had pom poms, which Walnut had that, but now all the kids had it. But the curriculum: I would have to go back and look through a list, but if you look at Walnut, Manlius and Wyanet specifically, it enhanced our curriculum pretty tremendously. Western, probably during consolidation, had the best curriculum and the lowest tax rate, ironically, but they were the lowest paid teachers. We just increased advanced math, sciences, clubs, extracurricular, FFA, ag class, shop class. Manlius was the only one I think that had a FFA until one year before when we co-oped agriculture with Walnut. Then some of those kids got to join FFA with our Manlius kids, but you had kids that were college bound got more. Non-college bound got more and I would have to look at details of the old. It was a significant increase.

Pogue: To kind of conclude then, tied to the issues that are now going on in Springfield. There has been a commission formed under House Bill 1216. I guess it is still in the business of having twenty people selected to look at the whole issue of school reorganization and to make some recommendations. As the person who has gone through this, would you have any suggestions for this commission? Either tied to incentives ...

Bolin: What is their mission in that House Bill 1216, Phil?

Pogue: Well, to look at the issue of, should schools reorganize. What are the advantages? What is the issue for the taxpayers toward that? What course offerings could be made?

Bolin: I would have definite opinions. I don't know about recommendations. I would have definite opinions. And maybe this comes in one of your later questions is I am a true believer in what Bureau Valley has become. Sit on the school board now as a chairman. I have a daughter who is a third year law student. I also had a daughter that dropped out of school. I have seen good and bad in education. I have seen our success and our failures as parents. And I think ... whenever you get bigger, there have to be mechanisms to keep kids from falling through the cracks. There have to be basic dollars to begin with for success and we lacked those at Manlius and we lacked them at Western. But at Bureau Valley we saw some kids falling in the cracks and even though we are looking at a pretty significant budget deficit this year, we did this risk intervention, we just funded it. We got a couple of people. And there really needs to be an address on kids that are maybe not college bound and somebody in the middle that are not IEP kids, that are not special-ed kids. There are some kids there in the middle that fall in the cracks. They get overwhelmed. And I don't know if that is a consolidation effort issue, but it is as schools get bigger and you have less of that accountability as far as you can fall and become a number. I am

pointing no fingers at anybody here. There do need to be mechanisms in there in consolidation that they have to be aware of, that kids can get lost in the shuffle as you get bigger, I believe.

Pogue: The last question: the Governor has currently talked about reducing the number of school districts in Illinois by about two thirds. Has there been any opinion regarding that from the local media or any organizations?

Bolin: I think people out here probably in our area probably laugh at it. And I think a lot of this governor. I think he has tried to do a good thing in tough times. These are very tough times, but obviously transportation budgets have been reimbursed very well over the last X amount of years – ten, twenty, fifty years, I don't know. And part of that reason was to encourage consolidation. When you look at eighty percent of eighty percent reimbursements, and then this year we are looking at a half a million dollar cut in our transportation reimbursement for the state on a one million dollar transportation budget. We are basically getting chopped up pretty good on the transportation. And then if you look at more consolidation, which probably in the end would mean more transportation, if you are already falling behind, you are not going to consolidate. You know, unless somebody puts another incentive in there to consolidate with an increase percentage of reimbursements. Maybe that is the stage that is being set today. But I will tell you, if there is ... right now rural school districts are getting hit on transportation and we are getting chopped up. Our education funds balance. But transportation: when you got 340 miles very sparsely populated with twelve hundred students, we are running a lot of miles for not a lot of kids. Is the answer in education more or fewer school districts? I think the answer for education is better paying jobs in rural Illinois as opposed to the best and brightest moving to Naperville. Or the best and brightest going to the western suburbs of Chicago. You know, we need good paying jobs to stabilize education in rural Illinois. It is a jobs issue. It isn't necessarily how you structure the consolidations because the concern you hear from parents or the citizens is, if you take away my high school, you will take away my identity and our town will die. Your town already was dying. That is why you consolidated. So if there is a need to consolidate more in the state of Illinois, then the leadership of Illinois needs to understand there is another core problem and that is a de-population of its rural people. And that attacks the middle class. That attacks the culture and that attacks the stability of your government. When Rome did it, when Greece did it, when their agriculture people moved to the cities you had degradation and you have had other problems. That was always a sign, in my opinion, that there was a decline of the culture and a decline of the civilization. So rather than put a band-aid on it, they need to understand that people need better, higher paying jobs in rural settings. And when I say Naperville or Plainfield or others is that is where my daughter who is a law student will probably go, is to Dallas or San Francisco or New York or Chicago. But there ought to be a job when they come out of four years of

college that they can make \$50,000, \$80,000 or \$100,000 and they don't have to be a lawyer or a doctor in rural Illinois to make those kinds of wages. There is the core issue. We need more jobs out here in these rural settings. Good paying jobs, not minimum wage, not \$10 an hour jobs, but good paying jobs. And so if we want to help education it is better paying jobs for those parents so they don't have to work three jobs per household and leave their kids home alone unattended and then they don't have time or the ability to get to the homework at night. It is a social issue. Education is a social issue. We see it. In 2000 we were at 24% of our students were free or reduced lunches. In 2010, we are at 40% and growing. That is unacceptable.

That is unsustainable no matter how big you want to make the school district in land mass. So what we have to do is look at jobs, economic development in rural America, rural Illinois. And that is why we are sitting where we are at, which is at a wind farm office, trying to bring in \$1,000,000 of investment into our school district. One billion. That is a game changer for our students. That is a game changer. And that is why my wife and I are here today Phil. Renewable energy is the key to rural America and rural Illinois. I think this governor knows that. There is how we change education, make it better. Then pretty soon people are coming from Plainfield and Naperville and they will want to live out here because everybody wants to live in rural America. They just can't make a living in rural America sometimes. We want them coming out here and saying we want to grow our families out here. We don't want to just retire out here. We want to grow our families out here. That is what I envision to help education. Bring the best and brightest back out of Naperville, back out of Plainfield to live in Bureau Valley. It is the separation of the chaff and we have been keeping the chaff. That needs to be turned around. So that is my political statement for you today. On the record, off the record, it doesn't matter. But I am a big believer in economic development to help education. So that is my political statement, Phil. I apologize for that.

Pogue: Okay. Well it has certainly been enjoyable to talk to you about the merger at Bureau Valley with six different school districts representing unit and dual and what you have been able to accomplish since that time. So thank you very much.

Bolin: Thanks, Phil. One other thing I might say right at the end is the reason it has been so successful – I mean it has just been tremendously successful at Bureau Valley, maybe even somewhat uniquely successful—is that it was so driven by grassroots people that have been so engaging. And, uh, it has been a thrill to watch this and had we not done this, it would have been a huge mistake for our communities, and I don't know where we would be at. I really don't know where, because we could not have survived alone. It just was not sustainable.

Pogue: Well, again, thank you very much Keith for the history and the update as to how this reorganization took place.

End of interview