

## Interview with Gene Jontry

#AI-A-L-2013-012

Interview # 1: March 18, 2013

Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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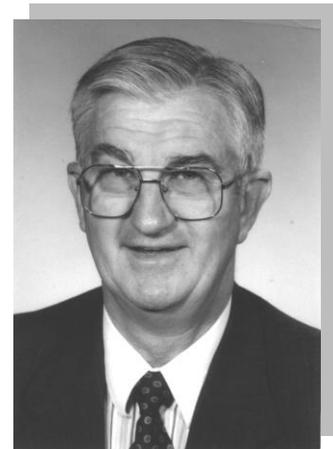
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Pogue: This is Philip Pogue. It's March 18, 2013; we're in Bloomington, Illinois. We're going to be talking today to Gene Jontry on school reorganization. He'll be talking to us about how schools reorganized, as well as how some of the small schools consolidated and closed, also his own experiences as a district superintendent and as a regional superintendent, within this topic of reorganization. So, Gene could you give us some background about yourself, your education and work experience?

Jontry: I grew up in the Chenoa rural grade school community, about twenty-five miles from Bloomington. I went through twelve years of school, there at Chenoa, as a student athlete and then migrated on to Illinois State University, at that time, to get my bachelor's degree in health, physical education, social studies and ultimately prepared in driver education.

I basically was involved, then, in moving to the University of Illinois, during that tenure of teaching and coaching at Chenoa, and worked on my master's degree at the University of Illinois, graduating in 1962.



Gene Jontry

In 1962, I became principal of Chenoa High School, after serving as a teacher and coach of football, basketball, track and athletic director for the period of 1959 through 1962. I have done some post-graduate work during that period of time at the University of Denver and at Illinois State University.

I served as teacher-coach at Chenoa for several years, through 1962. After that tenure, as a teacher-coach at the high school level, I became high school principal for five years, from 1962 to 1967. At that point, they offered me the superintendency of the unit, and I served as superintendent of the Chenoa Unit, #9 District, from 1967 to 1988. Also, during that period of time, for four years, I was joint superintendent between Octavia and Chenoa School Districts.

Prior to Chenoa being involved in any reorganization study, when the reorganizations came about much later, Chenoa had a Citizen Study Committee on schools. We went to other communities who had reorganized and did some interchange with information, meetings and that type of thing. Chenoa became a Unit District in 1949, when eighteen rural, agrarian school districts came and were absorbed into Chenoa Unit District #9, which had a grade school and a high school. Bus routes for that unit district were started first in 1950, with three bus routes bringing in the students from approximately the reduced number—from eighteen down to five to six of those districts—when it became a reality in 1949.

I served as a dual superintendent for Octavia and Chenoa School Districts, starting in 1984, 1985 for five years. The role that was really designed for a dual role for superintendents was primarily based upon cost savings on superintendents' salaries. We did not do a lot of other sharing, other than what was done already in special ed [education] co-ops.

One of the things that worked out exceedingly well was, I had extremely strong building principals. They ran the ship at the high school level...good grade school principals with experience, background and good common sense judgment. The boards of education met on different Mondays, so that I was able to coordinate, and I was able to cut down on some of the board meetings by not having as frequent attendance requirement of boards to me.

The districts were about sixteen miles apart, and I really felt that the building principals had very strong leadership roles in the school districts. I am indebted to those people who carried that. One of them continued on in the reorganization of Ridgeview, at a later date.

I served as a regional superintendent of schools for three counties. This was Livingston County, where I served after the election in [the] 1993-1994 area, where I was involved in defeating one of the candidates who was then

the Livingston County superintendent of schools, and I served for one year, 1994-95, in Livingston County.

Then, when the restructuring came about, to take place in August of 1995, I moved the office to a central location in Bloomington/Normal, which served the counties of McLean, DeWitt and Livingston County. We were involved, during my tenure of time, in quite a few school reorganization efforts. I will try to outline those in the comments that I'll make in the ensuing areas.

I had only been on the job about six weeks, when I received a major petition from the Unit 5 School District and Bloomington #87 for a reorganization petition, for which they wanted to put those two large units together. After twenty-two hours of hearings, held at Illinois State University and Illinois Wesleyan University, all the data [was] recorded and videotaped. After study, I made a recommendation to the State Board of Education that they should put the item on the ballot for a spring election vote. This took into consideration all financial data, the matter of curriculum, cost savings and other considerations, when you look at a valid consideration.

The vote on that reorganization took place in the spring of 1996, at which time it carried by a three to one margin in [Bloomington] #87, but was defeated soundly in Unit 5, by a three to one margin. That basically became a little sensitive area for a few months after the vote. But I would say to you today that, after that and some reshuffling on some property and some annexation detachment hearings, which the regional school trustees had, they have a very amiable working relationship today and share in all things, from technology to assessment and other cooperative efforts on staff development.

Pogue: What caused the interest to have a referendum between Bloomington 87 and Normal Unit 5?

Jontry: Cost considerations were a part of it, as well as transportation, where school buses were running through the City of Bloomington on their way to Unit 5 to the buildings where the children were housed. Unit 5 was growing; #87 was decreasing in enrollment and had room to house some of the students that were a growing population in Unit 5.

Since that time, as of this date, Normal Unit 5 has added three junior highs, has added two reconstructed, new high schools, and are contemplating some additional programming, at this time in the next five years, to add other junior highs, elementary and a more, maybe [a] centralized high school on the south side of Bloomington/Normal. Growth has been tremendous. They transport over 10,500 pupils per day; their student population is well over 13,500, and they grow in the kindergarten area, between 300 and 400 a year. So the growth in Normal has been substantial.

I would say, fiscally, Unit 5 has been strong, fiscally, subject to what is happening now with financial aid from the state, all the way from state aid to other reimbursements. Eighty-seven has a lot of property value and has not decreased in total assessment, up until this last year, where properties were decreasing in value. Of course, Unit 5 has faced some of the similar things, with some decreased in assessments, as compared to previous years for the past ten years.

Pogue: When you talked about Chenoa absorbing the one room and small schools, you mentioned there were eighteen separate districts at one time?

Jontry: Eighteen separate elementary centers. They were not all districts. Some of them were labeled as districts; others were just attendance centers. They might be Yates Center, Pike Center, that type of a situation. But sometimes there was a Hogan School, which wasn't a district. There may have been another school in another area of the Chenoa Unit 9 confines, but they were not all school districts at that time.

Pogue: Now, did those schools send their high school students, if they went to high school, mainly to Chenoa?

Jontry: All of those students went to Chenoa. All of the eighteen small attendance centers or school districts, per se, at that time, sent all of their students in to Chenoa High School.

When I was in the eighth grade, these students were coming in. The last four of those eighteen districts were in my eighth grade class, or they were at the high school level, mainly because they were grade school students. Those that were coming out of the seventh grade went into the eighth grade in Chenoa. And those [that] were at the eighth grade level, prior to this fall of '49, went into the high school as freshman.

Pogue: And why were there so many of these little schools in existence?

Jontry: Going back to the law, when you used to have a school center on about every six miles or square miles or whatever it was, they had them. They wanted local schools, so that the commuting distance for students [was short]. This was before transportation was provided by buses, so students walked to school in some cases, were taken by parents in some cases, or in some cases, they may have had other transportation. In going back to those schools, there may be horse drawn transportation at one time.

Pogue: Was Chenoa a unit district, or were they kind of a dual district type?

Jontry: Chenoa was a unit district. They had a superintendent elected, who was principal of the high school, and they had a separate elementary principal, but they were a unit district. There were several unit districts formed in the McLean County area during that era of 1949-50.

Pogue: What happened to those buildings?

Jontry: The buildings in many cases were developed into homes. In a few cases, after they set idle for a while, they were torn down or demolished. But in several areas...I can recall at least five of them, where homes were made out of them, and they're still standing today.

Pogue: Were those eighteen schools that you talked about phased out, all at the same time, or were they—

Jontry: No, at different intervals. Some of them actually took some students from some of the areas—where they weren't coming into Chenoa to the central school and made over by Weston—they might have taken some students from what the call Yates Center. [It was the] same thing up by Ocoya, north of Chenoa on Route 66 at that time. Some of the students that were going to school at Ocoya were brought in from some other surrounding areas, around McDowell.

Pogue: Now, were the students—when they were attending these one-room type schools—were they bused into Chenoa for high school, or were they on their own?

Jontry: They were bused into Chenoa. When the 1949 restructuring took place, bus transportation was provided for all the students, for high school and grade school. [They] were brought into the Chenoa High School or Chenoa Grade School.

Pogue: What was the last one of the eighteen schools to still exist?

Jontry: Weston Elementary, over in Weston, Illinois, between Chenoa and Fairbury. They had teachers that were there, and those teachers were brought into Chenoa Unit District #9 to serve as teachers in the elementary school.

One of them that stood out was Nellie Fitzpatrick. She was historically known as one of the last teachers in one of the schools, out in a rural area of the small metropolis of Weston, that encompassed a population of about 300.

Pogue: When you talked about the dual superintendency of Octavia and Chenoa, which district originated the merger ideas?

Jontry: The merger idea was primarily—maybe a brain child more—with the Octavia School District. But, at that time, there was feasibility discussions taking place between Octavia, Chenoa, Lexington and other school districts. So, the boards were meeting, and during the course of those board meetings, there was discussion centered [on] “What about the possibility of sharing a superintendency for cost saving potential?”

So they basically said that was the premium paramount, because they were co-oping in some other things, such as special education, where students were being taken from Chenoa to the Octavia District. Chenoa was also transporting some special ed to Leroy at that time, and there was some cooperative transportation arrangements made at that time.

But the total involvement for other things, it was a prelude to, hopefully, some reorganization in the future, between Chenoa, Octavia, Lexington and Gridley. Unfortunately, that did not develop later, between Octavia, Chenoa, Lexington and Gridley at that time.

Octavia branched out after that time, in feasibility studies, to be involved heavily with the Saybrook-Arrowsmith School District. That school district then came forward with the Octavia board and asked for a referendum to be put on the ballot to consolidate Octavia Unit #8 and Saybrook #11. Subsequently, the new school district was a sum total of those two school districts' district numbers. Octavia was eight, Saybrook-Arrowsmith eleven and Ridgeview became nineteen.

Pogue: When you think back to those dual days of the superintendency, you talked a little bit about how the boards tried to work it so that you weren't being stretched completely. You talked about the role of the principals and how they became important leaders. What were your biggest challenges from being one in two districts?

Jontry: [A] problem arose occasionally when it might have been better if a superintendent was present for a small crisis-type situation. But I had a car radio, and I was able to communicate with the head administrator of the buildings, with the janitorial maintenance staff and with the transportation staff, with radios. So I was able to keep in almost instant contact and had excellent—I repeat, excellent—staff in the superintendent's office as secretaries and bookkeepers. This made a very, very efficient type of way to be able to communicate, when you had all those subject to.

Some of my best moments were riding in the car between Chenoa and Colfax, sixteen miles, where I was absent from any contact with anyone in present bodily form, but I had immediate contact with them via the radio phone.

Pogue: Did you have any issues with athletic contests between the two?

Jontry: I knew what it was like to stand under the goal post at the football game. Chenoa and Octavia both had good football teams at that time and the state football playoffs. My daughter was also [a] cheerleader for Chenoa.

Then, subsequently after that, when I became superintendent to Ridgeview, I had to watch my step, because Chenoa was still in existence. My wife was still teaching at Chenoa, while I was superintendent of the

Ridgeview School District. Also, at the McLean County tournament, I would sit under the basket when Chenoa and Octavia were playing. I was rooting for my own children, wherever they were playing at that time, and my daughter was cheering, but I kept my mouth shut. (Pogue laughs)

Pogue: Were there any other big issues that you faced, being a dual superintendent?

Jontry: I think one of the main issues was a matter of school finance. The Octavia District was very strong in their financial structure. They had very large balances in their education building and particularly their transportation fund of \$450,000. The buildings were in excellent shape at Octavia, whereas Chenoa had been struggling with debt that had accumulated, going back to the 1960s or before.

[A] classic example, they [Chenoa] did not go to the maximum tax rate in their education fund. Yet, the first month I was in the school district, I had to go out and have the board president sign tax anticipation warrants. They wanted to keep the tax rate down, but they were borrowing money and paying interest on taxes to be distributed later via the route of the tax anticipation warrants. Chenoa struggled for financial issues for several years, even breeding into the time they're annexed to Prairie Central School District, later in 2004.

Pogue: Let's talk a little bit about that Ridgeview situation. You mentioned that it was Saybrook-Arrowsmith and Octavia. How did the vote go? Was that overwhelming in both areas?

Jontry: Very, very. Plagiarizing [copying] Prairie Central and other school districts on how they had gone about their public relations work, we involved all five communities in all kind of public and small meetings. We would meet at the fire department, with five to seven people. We would meet the senior citizens, with ninety-eight to a hundred, or we would go where anyone would talk with us. We tried to preach the message, "We're in this together, to improve the curriculum of both school districts and extracurricular activities." We worked very hard with citizens' committees, parents, former board members, board members.

In final analysis, we passed a referendum in all areas, by a three-to-one margin, and we passed a sixty cent tax increase—fifty cents in the education fund and ten cents in the building fund—to shore up the new district, so we wouldn't be in financial trouble, because Saybrook-Arrowsmith was issuing tax warrants. There, buildings were not in good shape, particularly the high school. So, we wanted to start off on a good, strong financial foot. That really came to be a strong foundation point for future years for the Ridgeview School District.

Pogue: You said that it got overwhelming support, three-to-one. What kind of concerns did the people express, who voted “no”?

Jontry: They did not want to leave the status quo of what they had had. They had had a school, a high school, in Saybrook; they’d had strong traditions with athletics and other things. But basically, they were unable to pass any tax referendums, repeatedly. The building was deteriorating at the high school level, but the people did not want to give up their school in their local community, even though we promised an elementary school in Arrowsmith, where there was good facilities yet. We did some renovation and rehabbing of that facility, after the vote passed.

We did not have an organized opposition, where people were out writing letters, petitioning against it. We had open public meetings, in which those people had an opportunity to speak their feelings in regard to it. But the majority carried very heavily with the strength of that.

We also worked out such answers to, “How are they going to be represented on the board of education?” They were to be elected at large, but we wanted to guarantee the Saybrook-Arrowsmith School District three board members. Four would come to the Octavia District, because of higher population and higher student population.

Pogue: How was it determined, the location of these attendance centers and the high school? You said the high school at Saybrook-Arrowsmith was not in the best shape?

Jontry: Basically, when analysis was made of the facilities, Colfax, which housed the high school, had a junior high and a grade school addition that had just been previously put onto it. The Octavia High School had a gym [and] a major multi-purpose room. They had a gym that would seat 1,900 to 2,100 people for ball games. They had a football field that was in good shape, and basically, they had a track. All those programs were very strong in Octavia School District. There were days when Saybrook-Arrowsmith had some good strong teams.

One of the other areas was the area of music. Music was a strong thing in the Octavia district, but the numbers were down in band, almost thirty-eight to forty-one pupils.

When you put the reorganization together and when parents and people understood that the band was going to be increased, the athletic teams were going to be increased, and it didn’t hurt that we won the conference in basketball two or three years. We won the county in basketball. And the king and queen, one came from Saybrook-Arrowsmith, and the queen came from the other. So those things that are emotionally involved were all things that were talked through.

But, the real proof of the pudding was when the organization was finalized, and you went in the first year of operation. You had the success with the athletic teams. You had the success with the growth of the band program, in marching band, in contest participation. You had a very fine fine arts program at Octavia, which absorbed in students who could take advantage of art. We had a very strong speech program, scholastic bowl. Those things were just non-athletic at that time, with the mesh of all those things.

So, there were a lot of good feelings expressed, to overcome the fact [that] we're going to have to give up the physical facility of a high school at Saybrook, but we we're going to gain these things by putting us together and strengthening the curriculum, the extracurricular programs, and we're going to have a more solvent school district that can have a future.

Pogue: Were there any buildings that were closed?

Jontry: Saybrook-Arrowsmith High School junior-senior high school, was closed and, as mentioned previously, the Arrowsmith Grade School was made into a K-4 unit, which housed Saybrook-Arrowsmith area students. We had also K-4 at [the] Octavia-Colfax complex, along with the junior-senior high school there. We transported students from [the] Saybrook-Arrowsmith area to be served in the junior-senior high school at the Colfax plant.

Pogue: So then, fifth graders were junior high age?

Jontry: Yes.

Pogue: How did you come up with the school name, colors and the nicknames?

Jontry: We had a committee composed of students, parents, former board members and at-large citizens, who basically studied the matter of the name of the district, the mascot, the school colors. Those were all promoted in various forms of alternatives. There happens to be a Moraine Ridge between Colfax and Saybrook-Arrowsmith. You can see all five communities from that Moraine Ridge, so the name Ridgeview came out of the committee as one of the selected names of the new district.

The colors of silver and gray and the mascot of the Mustang all came forth from the students' heavy recommendations that we considered. They felt strongly we should not stay with the same names of the Comanches from Saybrook-Arrowsmith or the Rockets from Octavia, but we should center ourselves on complete objectivity, with a new name of the district, new mascot and new colors.

Pogue: How many administrators were there before the merger and how many after that?

Jontry: Basically, we were involved in a reduction of one building administrator. We kept a K-4 administrator at Arrowsmith. We basically kept a junior high principal at Octavia, and we basically had a K-5 principal in elementary at Colfax. We dropped the building administrator, as a principal that was serving at Saybrook-Arrowsmith Junior-Senior High School, so we dropped one administrator.

Pogue: As to teachers, how did you get them assigned to the various positions?

Jontry: Basically, we took a look at the seniority list and the qualifications that were done. I was involved with the State Board of Education representative, Phil Imig(?), coming in and going through the qualifications of the staff members.

Then, based upon seniority, qualification, we basically determined, with board support, a reduction of five or six positions and a couple of non-certified positions. We retained most of the maintenance custodial staff, but we dropped one [at] Saybrook-Arrowsmith Junior-Senior High School.

We maintained most of all the bus routes that previously existed, because of the width, length of travel time, at that time, from Saybrook-Arrowsmith, coming up to the Colfax complex. We modified some of the special ed routes a little bit. But we still needed special ed routes, and we still need routes into the area vocational school.

But the students were all brought into Colfax that weren't in the K-4, and then the students were transported to Bloomington, to the Bloomington Area Vocational School, or they were transported, possibly, to wherever they were serviced with special needs programs. We did quite a bit of special needs programming locally for special ed students. We had students in special ed at the Arrowsmith facility, as well as Colfax.

Pogue: You had two different school districts. How did you deal with the issue of the curriculum and textbooks?

Jontry: Basically, we were fortunate in that we had a building administrator from Prairie Central School District who had previously served as a principal there and basically wanted to take a one year hiatus to try something else. But when he made application, and he knew that we were going to be available, he was willing to come on and start working five months before the organizational structure of the district going into existence July 1.

At that time, we took a look, with [a] committee of teachers, [at] the various curriculums, the various textbooks and those type of things. We made little change the first year. In some of the areas, we let students meet their own graduation requirements, so that [if] they started at Saybrook-Arrowsmith and their requirements were different, they were not sabotaged in going into their senior year with different requirements. But we worked with that whole

process, with a lot of committee meetings and teachers, administrators and board representation, to try to promote a sound curriculum for the new district.

We were able to offer some advanced courses that the Saybrook-Arrowsmith students had not had opportunity for. Basically, we were able to have numbers in several of the advanced classes in chemistry, physics, advanced math, whereas at Octavia, during the last year, we had a population of about eighty-one students.

Everyone in town was wondering why we needed to reorganize. We had all those pupils and all those buses. But when we told them there were only eighty-one pupils in the high school, and the per capita cost in Octavia was very high, around \$5,100 at that time or the high forties, \$4,900, whereas, that was a little high, as compared to some of the other districts at that time.

Pogue: The issue of salary schedules and working with the collective bargaining, how did that get resolved?

Jontry: Basically, as is the requirement of the state on reorganization, you go to the higher salary schedule. So several of the Saybrook-Arrowsmith School District people, who were on a lower salary schedule, gained the benefit of the higher salary schedule and the extent of that higher salary schedule at Octavia.

Basically, we also took the First Student bus drivers that were in the Saybrook-Arrowsmith area, and we employed all of them and employed them on the Octavia salary schedule. So none of the bus drivers that were driving for First Student that wanted a job was denied a position in the new district. We needed those bus drivers. Some of them were very good, and we retained all of them in the Ridgeview School District.

Pogue: As to conference affiliation, you talked about the strength of the programs, because of now greater numbers. Were there any problems with staying in your conference?

Jontry: No. We became a very, very strong... We were strong in basketball and the basketball conference, with the Sangamon Valley unit of conference competition. But when we brought in the numbers from Saybrook-Arrowsmith, we brought in a couple of tall basketball players. We increased our number in football. Whereas in the last year or so of the Octavia High School, I was concerned about the safety of several of our student athletes, who were being asked to participate as sophomores—or even as freshmen—on the varsity level in football in the Sangamon Valley and almost canceled one game at the end of one of those.

But the numbers grew, with the addition of Saybrook-Arrowsmith then. They were up in the thirties, with the football participation. The band growth, I mentioned before. We were able to add students in scholastic bowl, speech and other areas.

But the Sangamon Valley, we dominated in basketball for two years, back-to-back. We won the county tournament the last year of Octavia. We won it in the first two years of the Ridgeview School District. We had some pretty strong teams in the spring sports also. So, with the success of those teams, the identification, homecoming—as I mentioned previously, with the king and queen from the two different areas—there just were a lot of positive feelings.

The strength of the curriculum was one thing that the people really grew to have an appreciation for and a stronger mode, particularly those parents whose students were from the Saybrook-Arrowsmith area.

Pogue: How did you deal with the class pictures, trophies, uniforms, artifacts from the various districts?

Jontry: Fortunately, Saybrook-Arrowsmith had taken initiative already to take some of the trophies and items of memorabilia that were at the Saybrook-Arrowsmith High School. They had taken what was previously a elementary school in Saybrook and made that into a kind of a community center, with a gymnasium and a cafeteria serving area. They had some trophy cases in that building, so they took quite a few of the trophies that belonged to Saybrook-Arrowsmith and put them in that community center in the Saybrook community, the city of Saybrook.

As for Octavia, this was more of a sensitive area. They had an awful lot of trophies and things, going back many, many years, with a lot of success. So we went into storage with those...out of sight, out of mind. If you go to Octavia buildings today, which are Ridgeview, those trophies—since they're in their twenty-fifth year this year—they filled those trophy cases that were previously housing Octavia unit trophies for years. Unfortunately, I have to say that some of the trophies were given away. They were auctioned off, and in some cases, they were lost.

[This was] not the best tale, as compared to Chenoa, where I was. We developed a room at the bank with all the memorabilia from all of athletics, all of ag, all the music, scholastic bowl and ag-related contests. We have them in a bank in Chenoa, in the bottom floor of the Bank of Chenoa, and it's quite a array. But, none of the trophies, none of the banners [are there]. And it's not just athletics from the 1920s. It's music, ag, state contests, scholastic bowl, cheerleading trophies, that type of thing. Chenoa did a good job of dealing with memorabilia, one of the best in the state, I've been told. But it's separate from the grade school unit, which is now a K-4 unit. There's no trophy cases in there that houses Chenoa High School memorabilia.

Pogue: As we conclude our discussion about Ridgeview, when you think back to how you were trying to get the districts to go together, what was maybe one thing

that went smoother than you thought, and what was one that was maybe a little more difficult?

Jontry: Probably the smoothest thing was the matter of being able... for the boards of education to accept the format of the physical set-up of the facilities and where we would house the students. [We were] very concerned about whether that would be accepted, particularly by the Saybrook-Arrowsmith area population, of losing their high school and having to transport all their junior high and high school students to Colfax. That was met with some disappointment by some of the constituents. But it went smoother than I thought, because I don't think that the referendum would have passed three-to-one in their community, if we'd not had quite a bit of support for the housing arrangement that we had.

As to the negative aspect of it, I would have to point out that I think if you had something that didn't go real well or someone's students might not be participating and playing as much as if they would still be at Saybrook-Arrowsmith, it's kind of like, "Well, I don't know why the coach doesn't play my son or my daughter" or that type of thing. So you have those emotional-related things that deal with personnel decisions relative to participation. We did not have closed enrollment on cutting basketball players or football players or competition that ruled out that type of thing.

You always have a few people who maybe are a little upset, disgruntled, because the son and daughter is not getting enough playing time or that type of thing. But, in all honesty, I do not feel there were any major hurdles that became very emotional with the populations that we were serving in those five communities.

Pogue: As the final question on Ridgeview, you were then regional superintendent. Now, living in the Bloomington area, what are the current issues facing Ridgeview, as you see it, from the time that the district was formed and when you left it?

Jontry: I was concerned about the financial future of the school district, until wind farms came along, about five or six years ago. They were decreasing in enrollment a little bit. The assessed evaluation was impacted, as in any rural, agrarian school district. But, when you get 125 wind farms brought in, that had a tremendous financial impact upon that school district.

One of the other things that we did, that fifty cent tax increase in the education fund and ten in the building fund really helped that school district maintain a lot of viability. But that ultimately ran its course. So two years ago, they put on a two-year referendum for a referendum for fifty cents in the education fund, to be phased out this year.

I know they're observing their twenty-fifth anniversary of the school district this year and come forth. They are in pretty sound financial position, as compared to some situations, because of what we're looking at today, with 80 percent projections on state aid, transportation limitations that are still to be determined, what they total impact, and pro-ration—that you're aware of—that is taking place in a lot of areas.

I know that we're looking at some very heavy financial things that the Ridgeview School District is not going to be absolved. But I do make a personal effort to go to superintendents' meetings yet, to stay informed with thirty-two superintendents from this area, including Ridgeview. So I just go there to learn what's going on and stay abreast of it. That's the best way you can do it. But I know what is there, because of those meetings and the discussions held and some still going to Corn Belt Division meetings in our area. But I think finance is one thing.

I will say, in concluding on the Ridgeview, their physical facilities are outstanding for a small, downstate school district. They reworked all their facilities with air conditioning ventilation systems. They basically have two gyms. Now they have a multi-purpose room. They have a new outdoor track; they have new baseball and softball fields, and they have updated the equipment and the technology in the districts.

[In the] elementary [grades], Smart Board on up and the computer technology advances have been significant. So I feel like they're in pretty darn good shape, for the most part. But, to say they're not there facing financial struggles down the road, I would be remiss if I said, "No, that cannot materialize." They are a rural, agrarian school district; they've got a lot of area, but a lot of it is farmland.

I can say this; the estimates that come out the other day for farmland in the area are \$11,500 per acre, to an average of around \$10,500 in this area. So that's heavily agricultural farmland in that school district. But they're varying soil types, as you go down towards the Moraine Ridge. When you go out around Anchor, Colfax, Cooksville, you've got some of the best farmland in the area.

Pogue: As we look back to your years as regional superintendent, you talked about getting hit right away with the Bloomington and Normal reorganization vote that was unsuccessful. But you had also many others, due to the requirement of feasibility studies. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Jontry: Yes, I was inundated with probably up to seven feasibility studies that were taking place, beyond the Bloomington-Normal [area] that we had previously discussed. I was involved with Livingston County, with Woodland, Cornell, Flanagan and Gridley and Chenoa School Districts, which all border on parts

of Chenoa and Gridley in the Livingston County area, 40 percent maybe of their land population.

But I also had feasibility studies going on with Woodland, Cornell, Flanagan, Gridley and Chenoa; El Paso and Gridley; Chenoa and Lexington; Flanagan, Gridley and Chenoa; Chenoa, Lexington and Gridley; Chenoa #9 and Prairie Central #8; Cornell Grade, Cornell High and Flanagan; Blue Ridge and Leroy; Dwight Elementary and High School; Pontiac #90 and Flanagan #4; Dwight Township and Dwight Grade School District and Cornell High and Cornell Grade. Since those feasibilities that ran from 2001 to 2004, Rarian [a document cataloging system] and I was walking out of the district regional superintendence in June of 2003, some of these feasibility studies were already going in those areas.

I'm happy to report today that Cornell Grade School is no longer in existence. They took the advanced deactivation. They paid tuition for twenty-five years almost to Flanagan. And now Cornell is a part of the Flanagan School District. El Paso and Gridley have formed a new school district. Chenoa has been annexed to Prairie Central. We have previously discussed those annexations about Cornell, but basically, several of them are still there, in their present form. Dwight Township High School and Dwight Grade School are still there.

We still have Lexington. It's on its own, and Lexington was involved in two or three feasibility studies there, that I just mentioned, during that period of 2001 and 2003. But they're still standing.

Pogue: Now, Livingston County had some uniqueness, because you had unit districts. You had dual districts, and you even had this tuition situation. Did that complicate the feasibility studies, when you had multi-type districts?

Jontry: I think it was a factor in some of them, because I think that those that had dual elementary districts—even though they're in the feasibility study—that were involved, they may not have wanted to give up their separate identity as an elementary school district.

I'll use Rooks Creek, up at Graymont, as a good example. They basically have from forty-eight to fifty-one pupils involved in a K-8 situation. There are some years they don't even have a kindergarten program. If they only have three students, they'll send them into Pontiac #429. They've had petitions—and I had petitions when I was in the regional office—with people on the fringe of Rooks Creek, wanting to petition into #429 Elementary District, so their students could go through the junior high there and participate—we use the word athletics—[in] stronger program, that type of thing.

I think that Cornell felt very strongly they wanted to keep the grade school—that was an elementary district—but they were Cornell Grade and Cornell High School, separate districts. They had deactivated that high school twenty-five to thirty years before and paid tuition into Flanagan, but they wanted to maintain that elementary district.

You've got Saunemin, probably one of the more strong financial districts, that had deactivated and annexed to Pontiac High School District, approximately twenty years ago. They wanted to maintain an elementary school. They weren't and had not been involved in a feasibility study that I'm aware of.

You've had some other small, elementary districts, like Pontiac Esmon, going back over twenty years ago. They basically dissolved and went into Pontiac #429, but also some of their students—there out on the north fringes—went into Cornell Elementary District. They had some gentlemen's agreements that, when they were doing these, that they would let some of the petitioners with parents take their children and go to Cornell.

I don't know for sure all of what was done over around Piper City, in that area, but I know, at one time, they were involved with Prairie Central, over at Iroquois West and Tri-Point. And there were some decisions made, relative to where those students could go. So I think there was some give and take in some of these districts. But I know, from talking to board members and board president this year at the Pontiac Holiday Tournament, in regard to Rooks Creek at Graymont, they just want to keep their elementary school as long as they can.

Now the strength and quality of all those programs—as compared to when you're maybe more competitive, or you've got some numbers in some situations—is the other side of it, and is it the strongest situation for those children? But I have to say to you, based on most of the feedback, most of those students that have gone to Rooks Creek Elementary School have gone into the high school at Pontiac Township High School and done very well academically.

Pogue: Concerning the issue of dissolution and annexation of Chenoa to Prairie Central, you talked about your own roots with Chenoa, and you talked about Prairie Central sometimes giving you ideas, when you merged the Ridgeview system. What was your role in that dissolution annexation?

Jontry: One of my most demanding challenges and emotional involvement when I was in the regional office was dealing with my hometown and the annexation detachment considerations to go to Prairie Central. I had passed nine referendums or tax increases in the Chenoa School District. There were approximately thirty-five families that felt very strongly about wanting to put something together with Lexington, Chenoa and Gridley. There was also some

elements that wanted to look at Pontiac High School and maintain an elementary district in Chenoa. There are others that wanted to look broader than that and, otherwise, could we go El Paso, Gridley and Chenoa? But it became very emotional and demanding, a lot of hearings, office conferences in my office, with some of the heavy hitters that were promoting Lexington and Chenoa.

There was also a lack of complete solidness on the part of the Board of Education of Chenoa wanting to look towards Prairie Central. You had two very adamant board members, who were pushing to go to Lexington or to Pontiac, and you had approximately five board members that wanted to look towards Prairie Central. It became very heated; some strong emotions [were] expressed at public meetings and made it very difficult on superintendents serving in the capacity of superintendent of schools during that period of time, of which I will not name, but it became very difficult for a couple of them, coping with the board members and the split that was on the board of education of Chenoa Unit #9.

I would have to say, in fairness to the whole situation, that John Capasso, former teacher and dramatics instructor that I hired in Chenoa approximately thirty years ago, was very instrumental in being able to bridge the tide with some of the community members. He had a separate meeting with those that were against going to Prairie Central, on a Sunday night, Sunday afternoon, for three or four hours, and we were able to resolve the issue, down to where it was an amiable situation, to look seriously at being annexed to Prairie Central School District.

Up until that time, the subsequent meetings that were held were very emotionally packed, and there was some sweat. But the number of total population basis of families that were wanting to go someplace other than Prairie Central was not a large majority; I'm talking about thirty-five to forty families. And I will say this, in fairness, a couple of the more adamant people that were in that group of thirty came to me two years after the reorganization and admitted to me, "I did not support this reorganization, but my son went over there, got advanced classes, was king of the homecoming court, went to the U of I [University of Illinois] and was very successful in mechanical engineering. And I'm not sure if he would have stayed in our community, in the Chenoa program, in math, science and that type of thing [that he] would have been as successful. So, even though I opposed it, I'm very grateful for what took place with my son."

So, two or three, five of the families moved out of the community, after the annexation takes place in July 1 of that fiscal year of 2004 and did not have children in school in three of the cases. A couple of them went to Lexington. A couple of them sent their students to University High, and a couple transferred in their residency, north of Chenoa, into the Pontiac High School District.

But the major population of students and parents followed through with [their] commitment and supported Prairie Central. I think a lot of that has been removed, because the element now, you go seven years down the road and some of that has taken place, with erosion of those people in the community that were opposed to it.

Pogue: As to detachments, you talked about that briefly. Did you have to deal with any major detachment issues?

Jontry: Most of my detachment issues were rather small, several acres maybe, involved with the attachment to a school district that was contiguous. I can think of some with Leroy, Tri-Valley, some in Livingston County. I mentioned the one from Rooks Creek. I had a couple in Cornell School District, which is a part of Livingston County. I had a minor one with Chenoa, towards Prairie Central for the annexation. But most of them were small.

I did have one, after this vote of Unit 87 and Unit 5. The following year we had detachments of property from the Normal Unit District that involved TGI Friday's, a new, important house down here, Panera Bread... That whole corridor along there was a narrow strip that I had to deal with a petition to detach from Unit 5. That was successfully approved.

But the Board of Trustees that I had was a seasoned, experienced group of regional school trustees. Two were carryovers from Livingston County for several years. Two were from DeWitt County that went through a very demanding emotional vote involving the Wapella School District to go into Clinton. They had experience in going through that, regional trustees, some emotional restructuring. I think it helped. I also think it was very helpful, at the time of the situation between Prairie Central and Chenoa, the strength of the regional trustees to look at things in an objective pattern.

They wanted to put forth the educational student and meeting the needs of the student paramount. But they did not want to sabotage the financial base of any school district, because of detachments. So, they rode a fine line there. Of course, as you know, all kinds of assessments and data is brought in to those hearings, by the pros and the people.

I will say one thing that was very paramount in my situation; I had an excellent state's attorney in McLean County, Eric Ruud, who was very versed in school law, had been through many examples of situations and, as a counsel for the regional school trustees, was outstanding. This helped give good guidance to me, as regional superintendent of schools. He served before me, and he was still serving until three years ago.

Pogue: As we conclude, you've outlined a lot of experiences, starting with the closing of the small schools and joining the Chenoa Unit District, your experience of Ridgeview, your involvement as a dual superintendent and your work as

regional superintendent that got you into all sorts of experiences with feasibility studies and reorganization votes. The Classroom's First Commission<sup>1</sup> was chaired by Lieutenant Governor Simon. They made a number of recommendations. Where do you see some of these recommendations going, or what would be useful to create better reorganizations in Illinois?

Jontry: I am not totally versed on all the content of all those recommendations with great depth. I know one of the things was to promote cooperative efforts. Well, we've been doing cooperative purchasing of paper and other items. There are a lot of co-ops that are going on in the state. I think all school districts are interested in any way they can go together. Some of the recommendations, as I recall, were wanting to see how we might be able to do some cost savings, because money is crucial in these situations.

I think that it's a history that mandated reorganization, mandated by state legislature, even though the governor came out within the last year-and-a-half advocating, wanting to cut down from 846 school districts, down to 300. But the size and depth of those school districts and width and areas that would be created to get down to 300 school districts, when you've already got the Olympias and the Prairie Centrals and the Ridgeviews as examples in this area, would be hard to be able to comprehend how large you can get with some of these school districts that are already in existence, like those.

I think there's a potential need, definitely, for some of the small school districts that have very low populations, that have to look at some of the reorganization potential down the road that maybe are being advocated, when you have small numbers of fifty-one or forty-eight, as an example, and you don't have the fiscal resources.

But as long as the fiscal resources are there, I think, and then with the other play on this, as you're aware of the disregard for reimbursing school districts for transportation... When you're advocating restructuring, particularly in rural, agrarian areas, I think it's a big stop sign out there to whether this can be totally materialized, under those circumstances.

Pogue: Well, I want to thank you, Mr. Jontry, for explaining your involvement with reorganization throughout your career, and thank you very much for being part of our project.

Jontry: I'm very happy to be part of it, and I'm very happy to contribute what I could to the cause.(end of interview)

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<sup>1</sup> Created by the 2011 Illinois Public Act 97-0503, the Classrooms First Commission was charged with recommending ways Illinois school districts can improve student learning opportunities and reduce duplicative administrative costs. (<http://www.classrooms1st.org/faq.asp>)