

Interview with Steven Kelley

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: It's June 21, 2011. We're in Mount Carroll, Illinois. We're talking to Steven Kelley regarding the school reorganization that took place regarding West Carroll School district. That area is in Carroll County and involved the communities of Thomson, Savanna and Mount Carroll. So, at this time, I'd ask Mr. Kelley to give us a little background about his education, family and work experience.

Kelley: I was born in Savanna, went to Savanna High School. I graduated high school in 1970, went on to Illinois State University with a comprehensive major in accounting and business administration, graduating in 1974. Came back to Savanna and I started as a community banker in the Savanna State Bank, which has been moved on to Coal City. I've been in banking since 1974. I've been involved in lots of community activities, chambers of commerce, Lion's Club and so forth. My family, I have three children. My wife is a graduate of Western Illinois University, is a math teacher for Thomson High School and then moved on to the West Carroll Community School District and is a math teacher at the high school there. My three children were born in 1980, 1984 and 1987.

Pogue: What experiences did you have with school reorganization prior to West Carroll?

Kelley: I had no experience in consolidation prior to the West Carroll effort.

Pogue: Could you give us some history of the three districts that eventually went together: their square miles, number of schools, size of the high schools and prior efforts of reorganization?

Kelley: The three communities are in the northwest corner of Illinois. They kind of make a triangle. There's approximately ten miles between each of the three communities in that triangle, which made it an effective method of the consolidation effort. The three school districts: Thomson had one building. Thomson had approximately two hundred students in the whole district, about ninety-nine in the high school itself. Savanna had three buildings. Their population ran at about eight hundred students. Mount Carroll also had two buildings, and they had a population of, also, about five hundred students in their entire school district, probably about three hundred in the high school.

Their history has been that a lot of the residents in the three communities work within the three communities, whether they travel between the three communities and so forth. There was a close-knit shopping area in Savanna that eventually somewhat dried up, leaving people to have to go shop someplace else. Other than that, there was not a lot of interaction between the three communities prior to the consolidation effort.

There was a consolidation effort back in about 1998. The boards, at that time, started a conversation of the diminished enrollment and talking about consolidation, but the three communities were very much against the effort, at that time, and wanted to stay independent.

Pogue: What is the square miles, now, of this configuration?

Kelley: The square miles for the configuration is approximately forty-five square miles.

Pogue: What were the building conditions? Did any of the three communities have buildings of great concern?

Kelley: Mount Carroll had one building that was of great concern; it basically had been condemned twenty years ago. I think that was their major issue in going forward with the consolidation is that they just didn't have the building space. They had built a new high school. It didn't have the room in the high school to merge the elementary into. They had taken their debt limit as high as they could go with the special provisions from the State of Illinois. So, they were lacking educational space.

Savanna had closed one building, had sold it. They had excess capacity. They had built a new elementary school that was, maybe, two years old at the time. The high school was built in 1957, but was in very good condition, had a great floor space for the consolidated group to take a look at for the high school.

Thomson had one building, was maintained in very good condition. It housed kindergarten through high school, so that it, too, didn't have any other room for expansion. It was using its whole building.

Pogue: What were the three districts trying to do prior to reorganization to meet the needs of their students, either through cooperatives or shared teachers or courses or vocational efforts?

Kelley: The three districts, all three of them, were using vocational centers. Mount Carroll and Savanna, being in the north part of the area, they were using the educational centers out of Elizabeth, Illinois. Thomson was using the Whiteside group, which is down in Sterling, Illinois. Cooperative: between some of the teachers, only several teachers, several classes were using that method, say the Spanish classes or the different classes that would only have a few needs in each of the programs. Other than that, the schools maintained their own educational process.

They were using Highland Community College as an extension service for some of the upper level classes and using teachers within the district to teach those, giving the students the advantage of some college education being in their senior level.

Pogue: As far as athletic conference affiliation, were the three in different conferences?

Kelley: Two were in different. Savanna was in its own conference, and Mount Carroll and Thomson were in the same conference.

Pogue: As far as the financial status of the three districts, separately, how was their financial?

Kelley: The financial position of Savanna was very bad. They were into borrowing short-term to keep maintaining their budget. Their limit had just about ran out. Their interest in the consolidation was the fact that, budgetarily, they were at a point of really struggling.

Thomson was able to maintain a positive balance. They had a farm that had been left to the community, to the district, that they were using for educational purposes, so they could have a reserve fund by selling the farm. The farm ended up being sold for about five hundred thousand dollars prior to the consolidation, which added money into the group that they then consolidated with.

Mount Carroll was just on that verge of having financial problems, and their district was looking at cutting programs, cutting teachers in order to maintain a positive balance situation.

Pogue: You mentioned that, in 1998, there was not the interest, even though some of the discussions did take place. What changed that and when?

Kelley: I think the change came about when the monies were getting very tight, and each of the three school districts, separately, had to start looking at cutting teachers and cutting programs. The parents, at that time, felt that the best educational efforts needed to be looked at by the school districts and then got involved in talking about other ways of bringing educational opportunities to the students.

Pogue: Had the three schools looked at any other options since 1998?

Kelley: Thomson had been looking at consolidation efforts to the south of them, with the district of River Bend, Fulton, Illinois. The river kind of cuts everybody off. Savanna and Thomson are on the Mississippi River, so going west was not an option. We have a school district to the east of us, Eastland, that Mount Carroll had talked to. Savanna was kind of caught in the middle point, where it didn't really have any place to go. If it didn't go to Thomson and look for efforts there, independently, it couldn't go west. Mount Carroll was to the east of them. To the north of them was another consolidated district. So, Savanna was kind of caught where it needed to pursue efforts with Thomson or Thomson and Mount Carroll to be successful.

Pogue: Were there any other districts included in this three-way talk?

Kelley: The three-way talk had been talked about with Eastland Community School District, with the Fulton Community School District. There had been some talk with the district to the north, but the distance for transportation was too great, so that was dropped after the transportation costs were considered.

Pogue: How did the Committee of Ten get formed and at what date?

Kelley: Each of the school district boards got together for a joint meeting. At that particular time, after some side considerations and discussions, they came together for a joint vote to consider the idea of consolidation. Savanna, being the biggest district, Mount Carroll, being the second biggest district, and Thomson, the smallest, the three school districts felt that they did not want to give an edge to the larger two school districts. So, when the formation of the Committee of Ten came around, the Thomson School District was given four representatives, and Savanna and Mount Carroll were each given three representatives. Each of the independent school districts then solicited members from their district to make application to be part of the Committee of Ten. From those applications, the individual boards then selected their committee members to serve for the Committee of Ten.

Pogue: What tasks did the Committee of Ten have to complete?

Kelley: The Committee of Ten had to complete a multitude of tasks. First, it had to complete the budgetary task. What was the consolidated school district going to look like? What were its financial needs? What would the incomes be? Was this going to be a viable, long-term program by bringing the three school districts together? So, that was the major task; first, was to make sure the financial end of it could be satisfied.

The second task was to look at transportation. Since we had a lot of miles, a lot of country roads, that we had to cover to get the kids to school, that we couldn't all be located in one community, we had to use buildings in all three communities. We had to look at the transportation availability and the cost of that transportation as the second feasibility study.

The third thing, then, was the curriculum. Each of the school districts had their own curriculum, had their own textbook systems. We had to take a look at the curriculum that we had, what we wanted to provide, because we felt that, as a consolidated district, the Committee of Ten needed to come up with a curriculum that was somewhat expanded from what we did have, since a lot of the cuts to save money from the three districts had to come from cutting curriculum. So, curriculum was number three.

We also had a study that came out of Western Illinois University, on the three school districts, that had been created in 2003-2004 as a prelude to this consolidation. Using the information that Western Illinois had gathered, as to the district and so forth, the Committee of Ten used that information for a building block to come up with their program.

Pogue: How often did the committee meet?

Kelley: The committee met monthly, but we broke into sub-committees. So, the members took positions of chairing transportation committees, budget committees, curriculum committees, so that we could get a faster jump on it than just trying to all tackle the same tasks. So, three or four of the committee members became members of different committees, and then, they would then bring that back to the main committee.

Pogue: What relationship did you have with the three school boards?

Kelley: Really, we didn't. We left the three school boards totally out of the discussion area, period, except for individual information as to their current budgets, their curriculum, their student numbers, their trends. So, the superintendents of the three districts provided us with information we needed to put the package together, but really were not involved in the discussions.

Pogue: Then how many months did this Committee of Ten function?

Kelley: We had our first meeting in early March. I want to say March 6 was our first meeting that we organized under. We had then set a goal that we needed to have our decisions made before June 30th, so we could get it on the ballot for the next November election.

Pogue: So, you're talking March to June of the same year?

Kelley: Yes. Yes.

Pogue: And this was?

Kelley: 2004. We put this plan together, probably in less than ninety days. The timeframe was short because we had to meet the elections standards to get it on the November ballot.

Pogue: What value did the Western Illinois study provide for you? You talked about that you utilized parts of it.

Kelley: It was a great resource tool. They had taken the time to study the population densities of the different areas, so that we could determine how the different districts would possibly be set up for voting for the school board members. They had also looked at the curriculum, so we had a good resource tool as to the present curriculum with the schools. They had given some advice as to the curriculum expansions that could be created. There was also some financial information, that was gathered through the Western Illinois tools, that gave us some breakdowns that went far past what the superintendents had, maybe, at their hands at that time.

Pogue: Were there any other reorganizations considered, other than the consolidation one?

Kelley: No, not really. The school districts themselves, as independents, had talked about the cooperative statuses, and they just didn't feel it would work. So, their vote to go ahead with the consolidation plan was the only consideration the Committee of Ten was given.

Pogue: You talked about that you had to meet quite quickly to meet the period to put something on the ballot. Were there public hearings?

Kelley: Yes, there were public hearings. We held two public hearings. One was held in Savanna, and one was held in Mount Carroll. And, as our plan was put together, we kept the public informed as to our decision-making process and the facts that were gathered, so that they also could make an important decision when they went to the polls.

Pogue: Did you have much interest in those public hearings?

Kelley: No. The public hearings were not very well attended. We didn't really gather any pertinent information out the meetings. What mostly came out of the meetings was, the people of the different districts not wanting to lose their independent identity by losing their own high school, their own schools. So, it was more of a personal issue than an educational issue.

Pogue: Who conducted the hearings?

Kelley: The hearings were conducted by the Regional Superintendent of Schools, John Lange, with the Committee of Ten members available.

Pogue: What was the actual wording on the ballot?

Kelley: The actual wording on the ballot was very simple; we kept everything simple. It was whether or not you agree to the consolidation of the three school districts of Savanna, Thomson and Mount Carroll into one school district, and the name chosen by the Committee of Ten, that we used during the whole discussion, was West Carroll.

Pogue: And the tax rates, how was that determined?

Kelley: The tax rates were determined by the funding necessities out of the three groups, taking the present tax rates that we had and then breaking it backwards, from the equalized evaluations that were received from the county assessor's office, to come up with the budgetary numbers that needed to be fulfilled for the school district to be a financially viable entity.

Pogue: How did that new rate compare to the three individual rates?

Kelley: The Mount Carroll rate was higher than the consolidated school rate, so they saved a little bit of money. The Thomson rate—Thomson was actually a very efficient district, and its rate rose approximately a dollar and ten cents. Mount Carroll's rate dropped about ninety-seven cents. Savanna was right in the middle. It had a slight increase of forty-eight cents. So, in an overall position, the selling point to Mount Carroll in the consolidation was the savings of some tax dollars. The hardest part was convincing Thomson that, by paying more money, their kids would get a little bit better education. But, on the same token, Thomson's numbers at the high school had dropped to under a hundred, and it was a big concern as to whether or not they could stay as a viable entity with just that smaller number of students in the high school.

Pogue: What was decided about the bonding debt that each district had?

Kelley: The bonding debt was decided that each of districts would maintain their debt. Thomson came in with no debt. The Savanna School District had built the new Chestnut Park School. The bonds on the school would run out in 2017, and that bond debt would stay, with the old district of Savanna paying for that bonding debt. Mount Carroll had borrowed money for their new high school. That debt would be paid off in 2016, and that would, again, stay with the old district boundaries of Mount Carroll until it was paid.

Pogue: What were the advantages that were used in the campaign for consolidation that listed the advantages?

Kelley: We listed the advantages of better educational services for the student, to be able to expand the curriculum, being able to financially be solvent and stay solvent, so that the reversal of the reduction of teachers and the reduction of offerings within the school district would be eliminated.

Pogue: What type of curriculum was being considered, now, that you couldn't do before?

Kelley: We asked a group of the teachers from each of the three districts to be involved in developing the curriculum. Of course, we did this in three stages. First of all, stage one was all the required courses, so that we had that built in. We knew the number of classrooms that were needed. We knew the number of teachers that were needed. We knew the hours that would be taken up by the base curriculum courses.

Then, we built a second level. We did an expansion off of the first level to advanced classes, advanced biology, chemistry and so forth. Using those advanced classes, upper math classes, we then put those into the curriculum—the number of teachers needed, the number of rooms needed—to see what was left over. Then, we built in the, say the upper classes, the vocational, the Highland Community College, Sauk Valley Community College, their assistance in some of the higher curriculum for college credit, and built that into tier number three, so that, if we had that availability for the students to choose college prep courses, it was in the curriculum.

Pogue: What were the disadvantages that people were citing as the vote was coming closer?

Kelley: The disadvantages was all personal. Mount Carroll felt that they built a high school, that the high school needed to be at Mount Carroll. So, it was just a personal issue.

We had taken time to take a look at the number of classrooms in the buildings that we were going to retain. We built, then, the placement of the different classes, based upon the room availability, the size of the room and the number of students that were going to be in each of those classes. We found that the Savanna High School was the best suited building to retain the high school there. We felt that the Mount Carroll building, which was a high school, was best suited to have the middle school availability, sixth grade through eighth grade. The Thomson building was going to hold fourth and fifth grade, and the Chestnut Park School in Savanna was going to hold the kindergarten through third grade. We wanted to maintain that all of the divisions of the classes be maintained in the same building, so that the teachers could communicate between themselves, so that the students would be with their peers. So, that's why Thomson had the fourth and fifth grade. So, those teachers could act together; those age group students could act together. By having the elementary school in Savanna—the building that was suitable for the number of kids, the number of rooms that were needed—we kept the kindergarteners through the third grade in one building, separated from the bigger kids, which had been the Thomson, you know, had one building and all of them involved in one building. So, we felt that was the building analysis that we put forth to the population.

Of course, by doing that, then the kids were going to have to be on the bus a little longer. So, the disadvantage was transportation. Being a rural community, you know, some of these kids live out pretty far from where they're going to end up going to school at. The parents were worried about the timeframe the kids were going to be on the bus.

Pogue: What were the biggest obstacles to overcome related to planning for the referendum?

Kelley: The biggest obstacle was just time. Trying to get things done in that short a period of time with a Committee of Ten, we had to meet quite often. We had to be quite diligent in what we did. We needed everybody in the subcommittees to be gathering information as quickly as possible. And we pushed it through.

One of the reasons we pushed it through was, the state parameters for funding required one of the school districts to end in a positive balance. At that time, in 2004, Thomson was going to be the only district ending with a positive balance in their educational fund, and that was only going to be a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. If we waited until the end of 2005 for the consolidation, each of the three school districts would be in the red in their educational funds, and we would not have been able to get some of the incentives offered by the State of Illinois for the consolidation.

Pogue: What were the views of some of the sub-groups related to the referendum, such as the local businesses, the high school students, farmers, boards of education, teachers?

Kelley: The boards of education were all in very much in favor of the plans that were being put forward. We had no dissention out of the boards of education for what we were trying to do under their direction, but consolidation.

The students: fortunately, the districts had cooperated in sporting activities, so the students at Thomson played football with Mount Carroll, got to know the kids already, before we threw them into a classroom together, so that the students had already developed a relationship with their peer groups. So, Thomson was sending wrestlers up to Savanna. The kids are already involved with each other before having to break into the classroom, so we didn't feel that was going to be a problem.

The parents: a lot of long-time residents, second and third generations going through the school districts, that was hard for the parents to give up their high school, their colors, their schools' nicknames. So, the Committee of Ten tried to not address these issues. We were going to leave that for the new school board to address, as to how they would handle the sporting activities, the colors and so forth. We did not want to make that an issue. We wanted to stay to the topics of education, transportation and budgeting.

Pogue: And the farmers in the three districts?

Kelley: Farmers in the three districts were very positive after hearing the presentations that we made as far as finances and the goals. The farmers were very supportive of the effort that the Committee of Ten put through to analyze, financially, the situation.

Pogue: Were there any concern from the business community in any of the three?

Kelley: There was some concerns on some of the smaller businesses that had direct support from the, say, sporting activities or the school itself toward the students being there.

Mount Carroll: The small Dairy Queen here in town, got a lot of business at lunchtime from the school district, got a lot of business by having the sporting events. Savanna was the same way. Thomson was the same way. But, we decided we didn't want to dwell on those facts as to the consolidation. That would be a job for the new board, as to where they would set the placement of the different sporting activities. Again, we wanted to address, financially, long-term benefits for the students.

Pogue: How did the teachers' unions feel about this?

Kelley: The unions were skeptical in the beginning, but we got the teachers involved in the curriculum activities to be able to have their spokespersons heard for what was going to take place for them to teach. We also got the teachers involved in the decision as to the buildings and what classes be located in each of the buildings. So, by bringing the teachers along, as a group and individually, we slowly gained their confidence that this was the appropriate thing to do.

Pogue: What were the election results?

Kelley: The election result was that sixty-three percent of people voting voted in favor of the consolidation.

Pogue: And was that true in all three districts?

Kelley: Yes. All three districts majorly passed the referendum. All three were approximately in that same number, at sixty-three percent. So, it was pretty much equal throughout the three districts.

Pogue: Were there any pockets in a geographic area that had concerns about the proposal?

Kelley: No, none. Nothing was brought forward as to the proposal for the consolidation. Again, about the only thing we heard as the Committee of Ten was that we weren't using the buildings appropriately and that it was just, you know, "We don't want to give up our high school."

Pogue: Were there any buildings then closed?

Kelley: Yes, Mount Carroll's building that had been condemned. We felt no benefit in trying to retrieve that building. So, we did close Mount Carroll's elementary school and, eventually, had it sold. Savanna closed what was called the Lincoln School. It housed one of the elementary situations. That was then transferred out to the Chestnut Park area. So, Mount Carroll retained one building. Thomson retained their building. We had a separate business office for the Savanna School District. That was closed and sold, and the offices were moved into the Thomson building, which has some good administrative offices for them to work out of.

Pogue: Then you had the election, November 2004, and the target date for the start of the new West Carroll was July 1 of 2005?

Kelley: Yes.

Pogue: So, that meant that, then, the three boards had to work together to determine those concerns that parents had, like mascots and trophies.

Kelley: We left the new school board that was elected in the following election, name the actual school district. They allowed the students, after the consolidation was passed, to have an input as to the colors, the nickname for the sporting teams. So, the students got involved in it. Having the students involved in it, where the boards didn't have to actually make the decision, it became a whole lot easier to accept the new mascot, the new name, the new colors, because that's what the students wanted.

Pogue: So, then, in the November election, you were also voting for the new board?

Kelley: The board was elected the next go-around, the next public election.

Pogue: And that would have been?

Kelley: April of 2005.

Pogue: Now, you had, at one time, served on the Thomson board?

Kelley: Yes, I did.

Pogue: And what years were you there?

Kelley: I served from 1998 for eight years, so 1989 through 1998.

Pogue: Following the successful election, then, what happened to the Committee of Ten

Kelley: The Committee of Ten was then disbanded. Our duty was done. There wasn't anything we could add. With the election of the school board, they actually, then, took over the efforts of consolidating the three districts into one.

Pogue: You mentioned that the state provided incentives. What were those?

Kelley: One of the incentives was to receive pay to equalize the salaries of the three districts. Of course, you know, the three districts were pretty close. But, there was still some salaries that would have been different by the different schedules that were proposed. So, there was monies that was received, and it was approximately four thousand dollars per teacher that was received to benefit the new preparation of the working schedule for the union contract.

We also received some incentive money for transportation. We received some incentive money for the actual consolidation itself, to pay some expenses involved in the consolidation of the three districts.

Pogue: Did any of the three districts get help with any debt that they had?

Kelley: Yes. One of the incentives was that some of the debt that the Savanna district had—that they were borrowing in tax anticipation warrants—was paid. So, that eliminated that debt and having to be strung into bonds and the proposal of the expense for the new district. I want to say that approximately eight hundred thousand dollars of tax anticipation warrants were paid off with incentive money.

Pogue: And did the new district get all of those incentives?

Kelley: Yes, we did. Everything that the state had proposed that they would provide to us we did receive.

Pogue: Once the new district was created, what was felt to be the long-range challenges that West Carroll would face?

Kelley: The long-range challenges would be, again, student population. We tried to, in the Committee of Ten, use demographics from prior years to show the decline in population. We felt that a continuing problem for the district would be maintaining a level of student population.

Pogue: How is the consolidation progressing now that it's roughly five years after the fact?

Kelley: One of the things the new board did to help with the consolidation effort be accepted by the parents and students alike was, during the first four years, the high school had three different valedictorians, one selected from each of the "old district boundaries," so the efforts of those students, as they were having their grading scales moved forward, was that Mount Carroll, Savanna and Thomson all had a valedictorian in the first three years of the consolidation. And, of course, the fourth year, those kids would have been gone through the first four years of high school together, and they came back, then, to the single valedictorian. So, that was a way of being able to reward those students in the three different districts without blending and somebody losing a position. I think the school board did an excellent decision in bringing the people forward in that.

Pogue: Did anything from the feasibility study continue to help once the district was merged?

Kelley: I don't think they ever went back to the feasibility study after the merger. I do believe that, at that point, it was felt that it's now the West Carroll District. We need to go forward. We don't need to look backwards, where we were at. But we need to take a look and go forward and build a future instead of relying on the past.

Pogue: What help did the regional office, state board or others do to help the new West Carroll District?

Kelley: Mr. Lange was very important in being able to provide us with information as to certain dates that we had to meet, the obligations that the Committee of Ten had, the information that was required for different filings. So, they brought forward the legal aspects and the regulation aspects of the consolidation needs.

Pogue: How did the students and the community accept the consolidation?

Kelley: The majority of the students accepted the consolidation real well. Like I said, the sports activity did help quite a bit. I can tell you that, from Mount Carroll and Thomson cooperating in football, the kids got along very well. They were able to... Thomson's never had football, so the kids had an opportunity to do something that wasn't available to them. And they built great relations. You could tell that during the basketball games, because each of the three districts had their own basketball team. So, when Savanna, Thomson or Mount Carroll and Thomson played, you could see the friendship on the court. You know, the kids would joke around with each, and that came out of participating out on the football program. So, the kids accepted themselves real well.

There was always that small group that didn't want to be here, didn't want to associate, but the majority of the kids fell into the group real quick, so we really didn't have a student population problem accepting each other.

Pogue: How did the fine arts do with the merger?

Kelley: The fine arts program was much expanded. Because there were more kids that could be put in these programs, there was more time for the teacher. Instead of the teachers being more part-time involved in it, they had to expand their classroom activity because there were more kids being able to take those types of programs, and the fine arts expanded tremendously.

The band has had state recognition throughout the course of the start-up of the West Carroll consolidation. They have placed in high rankings in all the competitions. They have played several years in a row at the state basketball tournament as the number one selection for the state to have the band come down and play. It is one of the things that has made West Carroll a very consolidated district, with the band program. It is one of the efforts that... I know the board has tried to not eliminate fine arts because of the band's success in bringing the district together.

Pogue: How did the adjustment to attendance centers go?

Kelley: We saw no problems with the adjustment in the attendance centers towards the students themselves. The biggest problem we had was trying to make sure that we had the right transportation routes and not having some of the younger students on the buses too long. We had a few problems with the parents that didn't want their children to be on the bus that long and would deliver their kids to the specific schools.

I think the transportation becomes an overall continuing effort, only because there's a change in the students. Some graduate; the younger kids come along; the routes change. So, transportation is a continuing problem.

Pogue: Did you get any assistance from members of the General Assembly, your local senators or state reps?

Kelley: No, and I don't think we really asked for any. Mr. Lange, with the regional superintendent's office, was pretty good in giving us the information. We ran into really no snags. We didn't need any congressional help to move forward with finances. So, we really didn't pose any questions to them.

Pogue: You mentioned that some of your neighbors had already reorganized. Were any of them used as a model?

Kelley: No, they were not. Their consolidations were of a different nature. Their proximities were a little closer. There was a one-on-one consolidation with them, so they were more straight-lined than us, being on a triangle. So, no, we didn't use any of their past information.

Pogue: What has been the current status of mergers, either in Carroll County or the surrounding counties, since 2005?

Kelley: There has been no other consolidations. There has been consistent talks between the superintendents for continued consolidation for Carroll County. All of the districts are feeling the pinch of lower student population, which is causing the financial problem. So, I think, with the West Carroll consolidation and how well we promoted it, has kept the superintendents involved with each other to keep the communication lines open.

Pogue: The 1985 School Reform Act required all counties to hold hearings on how districts could reorganize as unit districts, with roughly fifteen hundred student population and a high school of five hundred. That was back in '85, and it appears that Carroll County didn't have much activity until Eastland then merged?

Kelley: Yes. I believe Eastland was the first merger. Shannon had a smaller population, and they had cut, probably, as many programs as they could cut. Eastland had the advantage of an upscale subdivision that was creating good finances for them through the real estate assessments. And Eastland, at that time: Lanark and Shannon got together the boards and discussed it. They decided it was the best thing to do, was to merge the Shannon High School into the Lanark High School, and then create a consolidated district. It was a very heated battle, and, even to today, there is a lot of animosity that that district consolidated. But financially, it was probably, in the long-run, the best thing that could happen for the Shannon students.

Pogue: Did building issues hinder reorganization talks in West Carroll? You indicated that you had some pretty clear buildings that were going to no longer be viable, other than the location of the high school.

Kelley: I don't think there was a hindrance. I think people wanted some input as to the placement of the student population. Of course, Mount Carroll built the new building as a high school. They wanted to maintain that designation as the high

school. All consideration was given as to the utilization of the buildings themselves by number of classrooms and sizes of classrooms. The Committee of Ten and the subcommittee on buildings didn't make any suggestions that, since Savanna had a high school, it was going to get the high school. But, the building itself was more conducive to having the high school placed in Savanna. Mount Carroll made a proposal that they would add on to the building, but, again, finances—It was just not the thing that the Committee of Ten, wanted to pass on to the new school district, would have more debt. So, we wanted to utilize the buildings the way they sat.

Pogue: And does the new West Carroll district qualify for any future state construction grants?

Kelley: At this particular time, I would say, yes; they probably do. Financially and need-wise, they don't need to. They have been talking about closing the Thomson building. Population has dropped that dramatically. They would move fourth and fifth graders into—and I guess they're going to do this next year—they're going to move the fourth and fifth graders in with the elementary in the Chestnut Park building. So, you'll have kindergarten through fifth grade. They would move pre-school and from the Excel Program, from the Chestnut Park building, down into Thomson. So, there'd still be some utilization of the building, but not to the level it's utilized right now.

Pogue: Currently, Governor Quinn has talked about reducing school districts from around eight hundred and seventy to three hundred some. A number of bills were submitted. Some called for a countywide school board. Some talked about that the ISBE (Illinois State Board of Education) would determine what schools should exist, and those would not even be voted on, necessarily, by the General Assembly. One did pass that called for a commission, House Bill 1215, to look at all of the issues regarding reorganization and give a report to the governor. That was going to be chaired by the Lieutenant Governor, with, roughly, twenty participants involved. What has been the feeling of people in West Carroll, once that came out from the governor?

Kelley: The majority of the people that I've spoken with, or have spoken to me, the main concern is it's not the need of consolidation, but the need that the State of Illinois lives up to its obligation, its need of funding the present educational system. We keep having money taken away from the school districts, payments delayed. The twenty-fourth payment on the annual basis is not received and put into the next coming school year. But, then again, they only receive twenty-four payments in the next school year, so that payment's never made up.

They've changed transportation. It used to be that we got eighty percent of our transportation costs. Then we got eighty percent of eighty percent. And now, they've change it to fifty percent of eighty percent. So, if they keep taking money away from school districts, it doesn't make any difference if they consolidate them.

You know, the money's just not there to go around. Maybe consolidating some of the metropolitan areas would be fine, but, when you get into the rural areas, such as Carroll County, I mean, you've got the whole county, that—even if you made two school districts out of it—the transportation would just be tremendous. The kids are going to be on the bus too long. And you're really not going to save anything because you save a superintendent's salary; you're still going to have the same number of students, based in different buildings.

So, consolidation isn't the ending point that needs to be looked at; it's the total funding picture that the majority of the residents in the West Carroll District are complaining about.

Pogue: What was the view taken by your local legislators regarding all of this activity?

Kelley: The local legislators keep saying that funding is the major portion that they want to take a look at, but they never do. I just don't know why funding for education keeps getting reduced or put on the back burner. Expenses increase. I know fuel costs and transportation have gone up like a personal person's budget would for gasoline now.

We're seeing reductions in valuations of property, so real estate tax assessments are going to go down. It's just a funding effort that needs to be addressed, and somebody's got to stand up.

Back in 1970, or what was it, '74, the lottery winnings were supposed to go to the school districts. Well, they did, but they took the general ledger line out of the budget, so we didn't get any more money; we got less. So, they've got to sit down and take a look at the moneys that have got to go to education to fund it.

Pogue: What happened to the administrators that were in the three districts after the consolidation?

Kelley: The new school district brought forward all three administrators into either a superintendency position, assistant superintendent position, and principals of the different buildings. So, we did not reduce the staff amount. There might have been some adjustments in some salaries, but it was really the need of those professionals to operate the new district in each of the buildings that we retained.

Pogue: So, to kind of sum up the financial side of the merger, transportation costs increased, because you're now busing quite a few more children from place-to-place. Salaries were adjusted, from the lowest paid, probably, to the highest, so, salaries went up. You did have savings from closing some buildings. Is there anything else on the financial side?

Kelley: One of the mistakes, I would say, that the new school board of West Carroll made was allowing their attorney to negotiate the new union contract and write the new union contract. I don't know how much input they had from the actual board. I don't know whether or not they took a look at the Committee of Ten's budget, but

the contract schedule that was built has been very detrimental to the new school district.

After the new school board was elected, several of the members resigned shortly after that. The gentleman that was in my district, and was president of the school board, resigned after three months. It was just too much, with his job and everything else. I replaced him and was involved with negotiations on the contract. It was a contract that just didn't allow the school district to have much flexibility. We were pretty much stuck with the language in the contract and weren't able to really negotiate with the union. I'd say that was the biggest problem they had.

So, anybody new going into consolidation, needs to really have some time to negotiate that contract, and make sure they're not only looking at today, as their expenses and their contract liabilities, but down the road, in the future, that it doesn't expand the expenses greatly for them. That's what happened with the West Carroll contract.

Pogue: How is the new West Carroll board selected? Is it by geography?

Kelley: Yes. By state regulation, the geography of the entire district is broken down into seven, equally-populated districts. So, each of the districts that would elect one person onto the school board, would have the same amount of people. So, there wouldn't be one district would have an advantage over a district by being larger or smaller. That has to be reconfigured, I believe, every ten years, so that, as the population shifts or changes, then the districts would change.

Pogue: Were there any others that helped the Committee of Ten, or were there just ten individuals that worked during that ninety day period?

Kelley: Each of the Committee of Ten members sub-chaired or chaired a subcommittee. Within that subcommittee, we had members of the community, businessmen, farmers, parents that volunteered to assist with that project.

Transportation. We probably had twenty members of the community involved in the transportation subcommittee, looking at leasing, purchasing, the routes. So, since we had a short period of time, the extra people out of the community to help the Committee of Ten members were greatly appreciated and greatly needed, so that we had extra bodies to perform the workload.

On the budget, we had all three superintendents involved in the budgetary process, bringing their old numbers together to put them into new numbers. We had another ten people from the community, mostly businessmen, that had knowledge of numbers, coming forth and working with the budgets and coming down into the tax rates with that budget.

So, yes, the community members were quite extensively involved in each of the subcommittees that helped the Committee of Ten members.

Pogue: Going back, you mentioned then that you served as a Thomson School Board member, 1980...

Kelley: 1989.

Pogue: To 1990?

Kelley: '06 or something like that, yeah.

Pogue: And then you joined the Committee of Ten in 2004?

Kelley: Prior to that, I was a member of the regional superintendent's board. So, I sat on that board for approximately five years and resigned my position with that to become a member of the Committee of Ten, so there was no conflict of interest that I would have, being on the regional superintendent's school board.

Pogue: And you then joined the West Carroll board as an appointee in...

Kelley: In June of 2005.

Pogue: And, are you currently still on the board?

Kelley: No, I'm not. My reelection I was defeated by a local person. So, for the last two years I've not been on the school board.

Pogue: Was there much interest in candidates for the school board, once the new district was formed?

Kelley: No, there was not. This last election, the number seven district, which contains Thomson itself, the district I'm in, we had two people. The last election that just transpired in April, the Mount Carroll number two district, number three district, did not have anybody that took out a petition. Both those districts were won by write-in candidates that came in at the last minute.

So, the disappointing part about the school district is it has not had an interest of people wanting to be part of the educational process. I don't know if that's because the job is really tough and takes a lot of time, or if it's a lack of interest, or it's just, some of the people don't want to get involved in something that could create some concerns.

Pogue: Well, as we wind down our interview, were there any problems that you heard about, as the new board dealt with issues? It sounds like the district name, school colors, school nickname, song, all of that was handled by the students. You had determined the building assignments and use of buildings and what would be closed. You talked about perhaps, the issue with the bargaining contract. Were there any issues with old class pictures, trophies and uniforms?

Kelley: The new board decided that they would take those older trophies, and they did auction them, sell them off at a particular time, so that, if any of the old residents of the district wanted to buy uniforms or trophies or pictures, it was allotted to them.

Some of the pictures, we tried to archive. They tried to archive and make them available in the, say, the new high school or whatever. So, they did try to retain some of the history.

Pogue: What is the current enrollment of the high school?

Kelley: The current enrollment in the high school has dropped to about four hundred and seventy-five. When the West Carroll district was first formed, the number was about five twenty-five.

Pogue: Well, I want to thank you for giving us feedback related to the merger of the Thomson, Savanna, Mount Carroll School Districts into West Carroll in the year 2005 officially; 2004 was when a lot of activity took place. Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for people involved in the topic of reorganization?

Kelley: I think the only thing that was a hindrance to the new school board for West Carroll was time. We pushed it through so fast that they actually had less—well, with the election being in April and the new district starting July first—they didn't even have sixty days to organize the new district. More time should have been allotted them to prepare for the turnover, instead of just the sixty days.

So, if we were to have done it all over again and had the appropriate opportunity not to lose any incentive, my suggestion would be that, you know, you take about a year, allowing that new district to form everything and get ready to go before its just dropped in their lap, and they've got to do decision-making while the district is open.

Pogue: And my final question is, having been on the Committee of Ten in 2004, what do you feel good about because of the merger?

Kelley: I was very supportive of the Committee of Ten's position, and I felt that was the real need in the reorganization, to allow the kids to have more educational opportunities. Without that financial backing, I knew, all through the school district, we were going to have to cut curriculum, and I didn't want that to happen. So, I feel good about the consolidation because the students of West Carroll now have those continued opportunities to learn what they want to, with the expanded classes and go on with their futures.

Pogue: Well, we want to thank Steven Kelley for giving us this insight into the activities here in Carroll County, and we want to express our appreciation on behalf of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Kelley: Thank you.

(End of Interview)