

Debunked: the myth of the overly tough 8th-grade graduation exam from 1895

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(update, Dec 7, 2003: More information about the 1895 exam has come to light since the publication of this article. The diligent research of local Saline County historians has proven beyond doubt that the 1895 exam is no hoax. As reported in the Salina Journal, this new evidence doesn't contradict any conclusions in this article, but it does reinforce the stern image of J.W. Armstrong, the superintendent who administered the tests to Saline County eighth graders in 1895. --DM)

When it comes to public education, everybody's an expert, especially folks who haven't stepped foot in a classroom in decades, and who recall their own schooling to be much better than it actually was. For an increasingly aging American population, there is a comforting simplicity in the notion that standards for learning were higher in the old days. If educators will simply re-emphasize "the basics"-- learning by rote, teaching right from wrong, and my favorite lip-biter, holding teachers accountable -- then whatever is wrong with the system will fix itself.

Enter the 1895 Graduation Examination for 8th Graders in Saline County, Kansas, which seems to offer compelling evidence of rigorous, effective teaching techniques used in one-room midwestern schoolhouses at the turn of the 19th century, and has become a rallying point for the education nostalgists. Critics of public ed have cited the test as clear proof that teachers, parents, and children were more resolute, more disciplined, and just mentally tougher before the modern public education system was put in place and the fundamental principles were lost.

After years of speculation regarding the veracity of the 1895 exam, there is now indisputable proof that the exam was indeed administered to eighth graders in Saline County and that passing the test was a requirement for graduation. But although the exam was real, its difficulty was not in any way typical. Questions in the 1895 exam were probably intended for aspiring schoolteachers seeking teaching credentials, not students.

One other thing we know for certain: Just as most eighth graders (let alone college students) would fail the 1895 exam today, hardly any eighth graders managed to pass the exam in 1895. For this reason, the 1895 exam is not a valid benchmark for educational standards of the era.

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The 1895 exam was re-discovered almost a century later by a Saline County historian, Helen Crawford, while she

was writing a history of the local schools. She came upon the document while perusing the personal artifacts of R.L. Armstrong, whose father, J.W. Armstrong, was the Saline County superintendent of schools in 1895. Crawford died in 1995, before completing her research. Her work in progress ended up in the care of the Smoky Valley Genealogy Society (Salina, KS), of which Crawford was a highly-respected member.

According to Judy Lilly, a research librarian at the Salina, Kansas library, "About four years ago, a member of the genealogy society put the [1895 exam] on the society's web site. After three years or so, the country suddenly discovered it there" (the transcribed exam questions are available at <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/kansas/genweb/ottawa/smoky.html>).

A simple Internet search on "8th grade exam" turns up hundreds of references to the exam questions unearthed by Crawford, most of them making the argument that public education stinks because none of today's students can pass the test. A few detractors point out that today's kids shouldn't be judged by yesterday's standards.

After gaining Internet momentum, the 1895 exam eventually flew into the radar of the national press. Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* cited the exam questions in a column lamenting low standards in public education. The *Washington Post* and National Public Radio also reported on the 100-year old exam that today's kids couldn't hope to pass, but without scrutinizing its authenticity. By July, 2000, the local story had a national following. The *Salina Journal* ran a front-page story on the exam, "105-year-old Saline County test in nation's spotlight," (<http://www.saljournal.com/sub/1895>) alongside a desktop-published recreation of the original. In the fall of 2001, *Harper's Magazine* reprinted the exam in a special issue dedicated to American education, also assuming the exam's severity to be typical for the times.

Dan Thomasson of the Scripps Howard News Service challenged readers to take the test for themselves, then wrote, "The object of this exercise was only to reveal what many of us have known for some time. The dumbing down of American public education over the past 100 years has been substantial, particularly in the last 50 years. When Great-grandma says she only had an eighth-grade education, don't smirk."

While others have latched onto the exam to promote their own agenda, putting the exam on the web site was strictly an 'isn't this interesting' kind of thing, according to Lilly. They never intended to insert the exam into the ongoing ideological debate over public education. "The genealogy society and the public library received numerous inquiries--at least half questioning its authenticity," she recalled. "There was no conspiracy, no desire to make a statement about the condition of education in America today. Someone even accused the

good ladies of the genealogy society of smoking local ditch weed. The response has been surprisingly ugly.”

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The 1895 exam is remarkable because it presumes a depth and breadth of knowledge that most eight-graders, let alone high-school students, do not possess. The exam has six sections, including Grammar, Arithmetic, U.S. History, Orthography, Geography, and Physiology, each with eight to ten questions requiring responses in essay form, much like a modern-day college exam. According to the instructions at the top of the test, “The Examination will be oral, and the Penmanship of Applications will be graded from the manuscripts.” Examinees are allotted six hours to complete the six sections.

The final question in the grammar section asks students to “Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.” The first question in the U.S. History section instructs students to “Give the epochs into which U.S. History is divided.” The fact that an entire section is devoted to Orthography--the study of the nature and use of symbols in writing systems--exudes a certain antiquity.

There is little question that the exam questions were devised for a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century, midwestern American audience. In the History Section, the Civil War is referred to as “the Rebellion.” The fifth question in the Geography section asks students to identify places that had geographic relevance in 1895: “Name and describe the following: Monrovia, Odessa, Denver, Manitoba, Hecla, Yukon, St. Helena, Juan Fernandez, Aspinwall, and Orinocco.”¹

1. If you're having trouble, Monrovia, Liberia was colonized by American black slaves in 1849; Hecla Island, Manitoba was settled in 1875 by Icelanders and noteworthy for the hardships--smallpox, brutal winters--endured by its early inhabitants; Juan Fernandez was a Spanish pilot who discovered the proper sea route from Callao to Chile, and the islands he discovered were later immortalized in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; St. Helena probably refers to the south Pacific Island used as a mid-ocean refueling station by fleets returning from the East Indies and the final exile of Napoleon Bonaparte; the Orinoco is a river in Venezuela; and Aspinwall was the starting point for a railroad that carried people across the isthmus of Panama--the city now known as Colon)

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I first encountered the exam questions in the form of an email attachment from an arch-conservative colleague (“Further evidence of deterioration of public schools?”), but I didn't really note the exam's severity until I saw it reprinted in our local daily newspaper, the *Gilroy Dispatch*, and tried to answer the questions myself. I too failed to score a passing grade on the 1895 exam. I was a little ashamed and yet I suspect most people would have difficulty scratching out the correct answer to the fourth question in the Mathematics section: “District No. 33 has a valuation of \$35,000. What is the necessary levy to carry on a school seven months at \$50 per month, and have \$104 for incidentals.”

When I showed the exam questions to my wife, a modern-day public school teacher, she acknowledged that the questions were definitely challenging, especially considering the intended audience, but quickly added that “any exam is difficult if you haven't been prepped in the material.”

I thought about my great-aunt, Martha Mauk. She was an Oklahoma school girl in 1895, and the eldest daughter of a homesteader. Was the quality of education better in her day? Maybe they did have a more rigorous curriculum and more effective teachers back then. Maybe kids truly were more focused and more disciplined learners.

But prairie life in 1895 could be harsh. Would farm kids have been expected to be this knowledgeable? Would they have had the time? I tried to imagine prairie mothers and fathers, some raising families in sod houses with no electricity or running water, chastising their children for not being able to explain phonetic orthography or use diacritical marks appropriately.

Turning to the Internet, I found that others shared my skepticism. Barbara Mikkelson's Urban Legends web site (<http://www.snopes2.com/language/document/1895exam.htm>) is especially skeptical. “Who's to say this document wasn't the work of some . . . hoaxster who wanted to demonstrate how much harder school was in the ‘good old days,’ was later filed away and forgotten, then rediscovered forty years later by others who assumed it to be real because it looked real?” Mikkelson's reasons for doubting the exam's authenticity include:

- No external evidence, in the form of a marked-up exam, or an account by someone who completed the exam, has been provided. There is nothing on paper confirming that the exam was given to an eighth-grader in Saline County in 1895.
- There is no indication that the test was designed specifically for eighth graders. In the instructions, examinees are referred to as “Applicants,” which could include anybody.

- The exam topics and the language used are “eerily” similar to a certification examination for prospective teachers prepared by the Examiners of Teachers for the Public Schools in Zanesville, Ohio in the late 1870s (this is reprinted on the Urban Legends web site for comparison).

I sent an email reiterating Mikkelson’s skeptical remarks to the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society web site, and immediately struck a raw nerve among the cadre of women historians there.

“...The Smoky Valley Genealogy Society members are getting very tired of responding to sophomoric questions about the 1895 test,” wrote Mrs. Mary Douglas, curator at the Smoky Valley Society. “The late Helen Crawford, a retired school teacher . . . had an impeccable reputation for veracity in her research. I personally knew Mrs. Crawford, and J.W.’s son, R.L., who was Saline County Treasurer for many years. The Armstrongs were pioneers in this area and highly respected in this community. If the Armstrong family and Mrs. Crawford said the test was an accurate copy of the original in J.W.’s personal papers, we accept that information as fact.”

About a week later I received, from the Smoky Valley Genealogy Society and Library, a photocopy of a photocopy of the original examination, titled “Graduation Examination Questions of Saline County Kansas, April 13, 1895.” The quality is poor, but it has the appearance of a document typeset by hand, not computer. The bottom is frayed and there is a crease down the middle, as if it had indeed been forgotten in a shoebox for decades.

There is no reason to suspect a hidden, ultra-conservative agenda on the part of Helen Crawford, who died before the exam was known outside of Salina, Kansas. Someone working on a book titled, *A Collection of Early School Records from Saline County, Kansas* would have no motivation to create an elaborate forgery of an old eighth-grade graduation exam. Moreover, inferring anything less than the 100 percent integrity of Helen Crawford or her research will make you no friends in Salina.

“What Mr. Armstrong must have told Helen is the extent of what we here in Salina know about the test.” Lilly wrote. “I have no doubt in my mind that the test is authentic. Since the heading of the test says ‘Examination Graduation Questions’ I would agree that it could possibly be for teachers and not students. . . . If you find it too fantastic to believe, then by all means label it a fraud, if you must. Perhaps some day an original copy of the test will show up. Perhaps not.”

While I did now believe in the exam’s authenticity, I was inclined to think that, as the Urban Legends web site suggests, over the years a teacher’s certification

exam had grown into a legend about an extremely harsh eighth-grade graduation exam administered by the county superintendent of schools. After all, according to *Cutler’s History of the State of Kansas*, thousands of schoolteachers, most of them women, were certified by the state of Kansas at the end of the 19th century. I was confident that someone, perhaps the members of the Smoky Valley Genealogy Society, would discover that the graduation applicants were in fact teacher candidates, not eighth-grade students. “I don’t think it reflects badly on local historian Helen Crawford that she could have been inadvertently misled by R.L.

Armstrong¹,” I wrote to Lilly.

Two weeks later I received another email from Judy Lilly. She had delved deeper. This time she provided incontrovertible evidence that the “applicants” referred to in the exam were indeed eight-graders in Saline County, and that the exam had definitely been administered by J.W. Armstrong, as claimed in the *Salina Journal* article.

“By way of gathering information that will put to rest the issue of the 1895 Saline County test, I went to the Register of Deeds office in the Saline County Court House,” wrote Lilly. “That office holds county school records. I consulted the Official Acts of the County Superintendent. The large ledger book contains the journal entries of the school superintendent for the county. He mentions visiting various schools and records when he is in the office working. For example: On April 1, 1895, he writes, ‘Monday, In office preparing Graduation Examination Questions.’ On April

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1. R.L. Armstrong’s credibility rating dropped sharply when I learned that he had also handed over to Helen Crawford the “1872 Rules for Teachers,” a laughable list of Draconian rules for social behavior that have been passed around for decades, with each exhibitor claiming it originated within their county or school district, department store, or factory. These infamous rules, including “After ten hours in school, the teachers may spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books” and “Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed,” first appeared in the 1930s. Unlike the 1895 exam, no one has located an original of the 1872 rules, nor is there any evidence that the rules were ever enforced. But their persistent recirculation belies the appeal of the underlying populist notion that folks were held to higher moral standards in great-great-grandmother’s day. The 1872 Rules for Teachers are posted with the 1895 Exam Questions on the Smoky Valley Historical Society web site.

13, he writes ‘Saturday, In office. Hold graduation examination.’”

Furthermore, according to Lilly, “The entries in the superintendent’s log confirm the date listed on the test copy. A notice for the graduation examination appears in the *Salina Daily Republican-Journal* on April 4, 1895. It reads just like the examination itself: ‘The graduation examination of Saline county will be held April 13, 1895, at the following places: Salina, New Cambria, Gypsum City, Assaria, Falun, Bavaria and Dist. No. 74 in Glendale township. J.W. Armstrong, County Superintendent.’”

Lilly also pointed out that because teacher certification exams were performed by the State Superintendent--as per the Laws and Regulations for Support of the Common Schools, published in 1891--J.W. Armstrong would not have been responsible for testing teaching candidates. Teacher certification was the state’s duty. So the 1895 exam was not administered to teaching candidates, as I had supposed.

But Lilly discovered something else in her research that gives the 1895 exam story an ultimately ironic twist: the majority of students in J.W. Armstrong’s school district failed his graduation exam. In fact, eight-graders were failing to graduate at a rate that today would lead to the firing of the superintendent and the recall of the school board.

Wrote Lilly: “... in the Register of Deeds are at least two ledgers called Records of Graduates. In the first volume for years 1889 to 1911, the names of the 7 graduates for 1895, who took the test and passed, are listed. It is interesting to note that the year before 28 students graduated.” Assuming enrollment stayed relatively constant, then somewhere between 50 and 80 percent fewer Saline County eighth-graders passed their graduation exam in 1895 than in 1894. Perhaps there was a huge drop-off in school attendance following 1894, but more likely the low graduation rate was due to the difficulty of the graduation exam introduced by superintendent Armstrong in 1895.

Nine years later, the failure rate wasn’t much improved, according to Lilly’s research: “... In 1904, the superintendent began to separate the graduates who passed the test from those who failed it. There were 82 ‘failures’ that year. By this time (and probably before) students seemed to automatically take the test twice within a month’s time. In 1905, after taking the examination twice, 34 passed and 92 failed.” Testimony to the difficulty of the 1895 exam: even after taking it twice, most students still couldn’t score well enough to graduate.

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It shouldn’t be surprising that Saline County students scored poorly on the 1895 exam. Midwestern farm kids

at the turn of the century weren’t much good at going to school. Absenteeism was a chronic problem of the times and Saline County was no exception. According to Cutler’s *History*: “...in 1882, there were 1,196 persons of school age, of whom 519 were males and 647 females. The number of pupils enrolled was 875, of whom 426 were males and 449 females. The average daily attendance was 584; males 280, and females 304.” In other words, as recently as 13 years before Armstrong initiated his test, only half of the school age kids in the county were regularly attending schools in the district. In Saline County circa 1895, schoolchildren were missing school at a rate modern day educators and parents would find utterly unacceptable.

But this should not be surprising. The first priority was family survival, not the children’s education. When you were old enough to help in the field, you were sent there. When you needed to hunt to put something on the table, that came before schoolwork. Local economies of the time were vulnerable to natural disasters, and less equipped to withstand a flood or to overcome a plague of grasshoppers, both of which events caused havoc in Saline County back in the good old days.

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Is the 1895 exam authentic? Doubtless it is. Is it a fair representation of eighth-grade graduation exams in Middle America at the turn of the century? Doubtless it isn’t. Other graduation exams from the same period of American history use simple language and ask straightforward questions in a direct manner, which makes them unremarkable, and unsuitable for passing along with tsk-tsk remarks about the woeful state of public education.

But why are the questions so difficult? Perhaps J.W. Armstrong was an overzealous administrator who elevated academic standards to an unachievable level. Perhaps he was a latter-day education reformer, hellbent on raising the low expectations for learning that he personally found unacceptable. Perhaps he stocked his graduation exam with questions borrowed from a teacher certification examination in an attempt to motivate students and teachers to achieve a dramatically higher level of performance. Perhaps the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society will delve further into old J.W.’s letters and give us some insight into the man’s motivations.

Meanwhile, the 1895 exam will continue to make the Internet rounds as “I told you so” anecdotal evidence that dovetails perfectly with popular misconceptions about the diminishing quality of public education. Ironically, the person who devised the notorious 1895 graduation exam might be encouraged to see how far the public education system in Saline County has advanced since his day, and the greater value we now place on a proper education.

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