



Inez Johnson Lewis, County and State Superintendent of Schools, 1908-1946

## *Special Legacy Award: Inez Johnson Lewis*

*Special thanks to Colorado College, Tutt Library, Special Collections*

In 1895, after graduating from Colorado Springs High School, 20-year-old Inez Johnson became an elementary school teacher. Miss Johnson taught at numerous elementary schools in El Paso County, including one in Palmer Lake. Records show that her annual salary was \$50.00.

During Inez's tenure in education, a career that spanned half a century, the offices of County and State Superintendents were elected positions with two-year terms. In 1908, Inez won the first of many County Superintendent of Schools elections.

According to a Lewis family scrapbook, "Harry Lewis the manager of Holyoke Lumber Yards was a passenger for Denver thursday (sic) evening. From there he will go to Colorado Springs where it is said resides the only girl in the world for him and some friends say they suspicion very strongly that this visit will in all probability settle the matter once and for all." Indeed, the matter was settled once and for all. Inez, thirty-five, and Harry, thirty-two, were married in December of 1910. Harry became a successful Colorado Springs businessman, and with his support, Inez became an increasingly accomplished leader.

As researcher Nawana Britenriker wrote, "These years of leadership in the Colorado school system would last two world wars and America's Great Depression. During her experience in office, 1908-1946, the face of America would change in every aspect, from social institutions to family lifestyles and she managed as so many did not, to stay abreast of those changes and even, in some cases, to outstrip them. Her life and her work evanesced with her effort and achievement, and her name was quite literally a household word. Her vision for Colorado school children would be considered contemporary even by today's standards. Her impact on the Colorado system was tremendous, yet her sole public memorial is the Lewis Consolidated School in Monument, Colorado..."

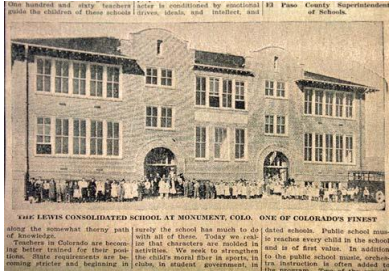


Plaque on "Big Red" reads, Inez J. Lewis School AD 1920

The Inez Johnson Lewis School at 146 Jefferson Street was built in 1920, and is known to many as "Big Red." As noted in the National Register of Historic Places, "It was one of the first buildings constructed in the region for the purpose of consolidating students in order to provide a quality education beyond grade school." "Big Red" and, in part, the Lewis-Palmer School District are named in honor of Inez Johnson Lewis.

When Inez took office, there were 58 separate districts in El Paso County. In 1929, when she ended her service as County Superintendent, there were 18. This was significant. Most of these districts were comprised of rural, one-room school houses. Many were strewn over expanses of farm and ranch lands.

Some were located in the mountains. Local revenues generated by these individual districts were not sufficient to provide secondary education. Mrs. Lewis knew the increasing importance of a high school education, and she believed all children should have the opportunity to earn a diploma. "Education is Colorado's biggest business. Colorado believes in education. Children from homes in the country areas are entitled to an education comparable to that of an urban child, not only for his own sake but for the sake of the nation," said Mrs. Lewis while addressing the National Education Association.



Mrs. Lewis embraced the challenge of convincing rural communities to give up their small school and consolidate with their rather distant neighbors. One can only imagine the hesitation and opposition she encountered, given that these schools were the heart of these small towns. Inez travelled far and wide, often at her own expense, in order to meet with community leaders, parents, teachers, and students. Travel wasn't easy, ranging from train to horse and buggy.

The Lewis-Palmer Consolidated School was hailed as an example of excellence in education for rural communities

In the month of December 1927 alone, Inez travelled 516 miles. While difficult, she insisted on these journeys because they made it possible for her to establish those personal relationships that she so valued. As County Superintendent, Mrs. Lewis required every 6th, 7th, and 8th grader to provide her with a sample of their writing. This so she could assess student progress and teacher performance. Mrs. Lewis didn't stop there. She personally responded to every student with words of encouragement. These correspondences often continued for years. By the time Mrs. Lewis left office, the high school graduation had notably increased. Because of Mrs. Lewis, a high school education and diploma became accessible to all county residents regardless of where they lived.

Inez's accomplishments were numerous. She assured that all schools had safe drinking water. She established preschools, vocational schools, and adult education programs. Mrs. Lewis established a circulating library. She created school hot lunch programs and a student transportation system. She facilitated academic and athletic competitions among county schools. She brought the arts to local classrooms, and she organized an annual El Paso County choir concert. Inez was instrumental in improving content area curriculum at all grade levels. She believed, "...the school program if made broad enough will be the means of directing the energies of boys and girls and adult citizens toward a cultural field and will make their lives safer, happier, and better."

Seven consecutive terms as County Superintendent of Schools demonstrated her popularity. Her accomplishments in El Paso County attracted attention across the state and beyond. Headlines in a local newspaper read, "Schools in El Paso County Among the Finest in the Land." Another read, "The Lewis Consolidated School at Monument, Colorado – One of Colorado's Finest." Inez Lewis certainly did give District 38 a brilliant beginning.

It would be a mistake to think that her impressive professional accomplishments were due to a charmed personal life. During this time, Inez's mother died, leaving Inez to care for her two younger sisters, one

of whom contracted polio. In 1913, Inez lost her father. After years of illness, Harry Lewis died in 1923. Inez was devastated by her husband's death. She stepped back a bit and took time to visit his family in Atlanta. Upon her return, she resumed her work.

In 1928, Inez ran for State Superintendent of Schools. She lost. Mrs. Lewis then used the next two years to prepare for future elections. She finished her Bachelor's Degree at Colorado College. She travelled as a delegate to the World Federation of Education Association conference in Switzerland, and she earned her Master's Degree in School Administration at Columbia University. In 1930, Inez ran again for the office of State Superintendent. This time she won, and it was off to the State Capitol for Inez! In the following years, she was awarded two honorary degrees: Doctor of Education from the University of Colorado and Doctor of Law from Colorado College.



During her initial years as State Superintendent, the country was in the grip of the Great Depression. Dr. Lewis travelled the state speaking to educators, community leaders, and parents. She worked to keep the focus on education in spite of the extremely difficult economic conditions being suffered by families, businesses, and government entities. She communicated frequently by writing articles for newspapers and magazines, and she participated in numerous

Lewis was commended in the Boston Journal of Education for success in bringing quality education to rural communities

radio addresses. As the Depression subsided, she was quick to promote renewed funding for education. In a letter to the editor of the Rocky Mountain News she vigorously protested an editorial that stated, "In rural communities, educational opportunities should be exactly what they can afford, no more or no less." Her response was lengthy and passionate. In part it included, "The problems concerning our schools are difficult. I am aware of their complexities. However, I have faith that if we can become more 'state conscious' and realize that Colorado is one great unit of vast and natural resources instead of unrelated, disintegrated social groups, that people of the state can by intelligent cooperation develop our natural and human resources. This development and growth can only take place by means of education in the broadest sense."

Inez was deeply concerned about school funding and would lead the charge to reform funding practices for the rest of her career. In a radio address she stated, "Public education is not, can we afford education, but rather how much we dare let the school program be curtailed in view a crisis of character and economic breakdown." Dr. Lewis would use her office to improve curriculum for Colorado schools, a curriculum that was deemed to be one of the finest in the country. She became an advocate for health and safety education that included drivers' education. She was a proponent of comprehensive statewide adult and vocational education. During World War II, she did much to include students in the war effort, while strongly encouraging them to finish high school before entering the military. After World War II, seeing the upcoming potential of aviation science and related careers, she promoted aviation curriculum

in schools. She assured the viability of these programs by attaining grant monies to fund them. Mrs. Lewis was a strong supporter of teachers. She worked to raise salaries to more professional levels, and she implemented a retirement plan for them, believing that teachers “brought us close to the heart of humanity and that their efforts to develop the mind, the body, and the spirit” were worthy of appropriate compensation.

Dr. Lewis retired from the office of State Superintendent of Schools at the age of 71. She returned to Colorado Springs in her early 80s. She died in 1964.

Inez considered teachers “intellectual and spiritual adventurers,” and the same can be said of Dr. Lewis. With grace and perseverance, Dr. Inez Johnson Lewis selflessly gave her energy, intelligence, and heart to Colorado’s children. To this day, she remains a most fitting standard bearer for the Lewis-Palmer School District.


<p><b>“Yes” on NDMENT NO. 2</b></p>	<p>...worry.</p> <p><b>MRS. INEZ JOHNSON LEWIS</b></p> <p>(By Request)</p> <p>If the vote were among school children of El Paso county, Mrs. Inez Johnson Lewis would be elected state superintendent of public instruction, unanimously. During her term as county superintendent here, Mrs. Lewis established a contact of friendliness between the office and the school kiddies. She brought an ideal to the office. Mrs. Lewis had faith in the children of the rural schools. And they, faith in her. If elected on November 4, she will bring that same spirit of practical idealism to the state office; to Colorado education and, more important, to Colorado children.</p>
<p><b>PUEBLOAN DIES</b></p> <p>Crockett, 57, active in business here many way from a heart at 7. He was associated business with his Crockett and was a</p>	<p>...Dated a</p> <p>Published</p> <p>BANKRU</p> <p>In the</p> <p>To the F</p> <p>the Di</p> <p>for the</p> <p>Pueblo an</p>

Lewis’ popularity is described in The Pueblo Indicator

Education Is the Cornerstone of Democracy

*Her Program Today is . . .*

*“Better Citizenship Tomorrow”*



DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE FOR RE-ELECTION

**Inez Johnson Lewis**

STATE SUPERINTENDENT

— of —

**Public Instruction**

General Election November 7, 1944

Education Is the Cornerstone of Democracy

Campaign literature from Lewis’ run for State Superintendent of Schools