

MUSKERRY East school is at the crossroads — both figuratively and literally.

In various guises, a school building has occupied the same site on the Campaspe flood plains since 1878, when the tiny Muskerry United Methodist Free Church committee graciously allowed its new church building to double as a schoolhouse.

The current building, a quaint little weatherboard, was moved to the site in 1926 when the school at Weston closed.

That year's school inspector termed Muskerry East an "outback school", and even today it is not difficult to empathise with his impression, for it is quite a shock to come upon little school No. 2108, stuck as it is virtually in the middle of nowhere.

Roads out that way run gun-barrel straight more often than not, with wheat and sheep paddocks stretching away on either side.

Suddenly though, you're over a rise and there, in a small clump of trees, sits a building, the only one in sight from horizon to horizon.

Roads radiate away from the school, heading to Goornong, Myola, Toolleen and Knowsley. You would wonder where on earth the children to populate it might come from. Plenty of sheep: few houses.

As it happens though, Muskerry East has as much right as any urban school to be termed a "neighborhood school".

Council president Anita Tuohey produces a hand-drawn map of the school's catchment area, showing pupils' houses to be arranged in a relatively tight cluster (certainly as judged by "outback" distances).

It has always been thus. A class register from the early century reveals some of the students to be Hicksons, Roulstons, Burkes and Tuoheys. This year's enrolment includes Hickson, Roulston, Burke and, of course, Tuohey.

They are big into dynasties out Muskerry way.

Even the present teacher is a Roulston — Nancy — and she attended the school herself on the odd occasion back in the war years.

It is this unbroken link with the past — and any suggestion it might



be severed — which particularly rankles the parents in their fight with the Directorate of School Education to keep 2108 open next year.

"We have drawn up a list of students from now until the year 2000 showing our numbers (now 15) will be between 16 and 21," says Mrs Tuohey. "Those people have all guaranteed to send their children here but DSE is saying they're not interested in community guarantees."

This hurts a community which has seen its parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and then some, attend 2108 on foot, by horse, by bicycle and now, more usually, by car.

Muskerry East began in 1878 in the old Methodist church building — 26 feet by 16 feet, annual rent £8..

In 1883, a wooden schoolhouse with three attached rooms was erected at a cost of £473. Falling

numbers dictated closure in 1902, with a 20-year recess until school reopened in the old church in 1922.

The temporary teacher was "Miss Elliot", a redoubtable woman who was such an avid knitter that students recalled seeing her walking to school still knitting!

A new school was authorised in 1926 and the former Weston school moved into its present location.

From 1941 to 1945, head teacher Mr Ward alternated between teaching at Muskerry East and nearby Myola. When Muskerry East closed again in 1945, pupils went to Myola or on to correspondence.

A long, long battle ensued before the Education Department agreed to re-open the school in 1951. Each family donated one pound for library books.

The period since 1951 has therefore marked the longest consecutive period of schooling at 2108.

(The centenary booklet notes that 1966 was "a year of great improvements". Electricity arrived, "leading the way for a refrigerator, a fan, a clock and a pump to bring water from the council dam".

Many a former pupil would have envied that pump as they lugged buckets of water from the dam to water the school garden.

Joan Conroy, who can still regularly be seen buzzing around working in the school garden, has been sending her brood to the school for 26 years. All nine of them!

A hard worker for the school for a quarter of a century, she bristles at the suggestion that community guarantees are worthless.

Mrs Conroy points out that Muskerry East is now the only school remaining open in a sweeping arc between Heathcote and Elmore. Knowsley, Toolleen, Myola, Myola East, Creek View and Runnymede have all gone. Only

Muskerry East still flies the flag — literally — across that vast expanse of farmland.

But the bureaucrats would have it closed, too, with children being bussed to Goornong (15.6 km away "as the crow flies, not as the school bus drives").

According to the locals (who congregated in their numbers yesterday for a special morning tea to coincide with the Advertiser's visit), closing the school would shut down the community.

There is nothing at Muskerry East *but* the school. It has become the "parish pump" of the 1990s, the place where people gather to catch up with each other and swap news.

Joan Conroy claims women would be particularly hard hit by this, and brings a chorus of agreement from her neighbors.

"We're all on farms and most of us are business partners with our husbands," says school council secretary Dianne Hickson. "The only chance we get to catch up with people is when we drop off or pick up the kids."

When the Government taskforce began its inquiry, Muskerry East was happy to go along with it, content in the belief that it would easily fulfil the quality education provisions needed to remain open.

Now though, the parents are wary of the negotiations, claiming the Government has shifted the goalposts several times in a bid to force small schools to close.

Anita Tuohey said the school had now decided on a "pause" in its dealings with the taskforce "until they provide us with some more information".

That latest information is not likely to improve Muskerry East's chances. An agreement sealed this week between Education Minister Don Hayward and principals appeared to sound the deathknell for any "non-remote" school which does not have at least 21 pupils in 1994. Muskerry East would have 16.

What an irony if 1926's "outback school" should be closed because it is "non-remote".

If the worst were to happen, it would be the third closure for 2108, which closed for lack of numbers between 1902 and 1922 and 1945 and 1951.