

Breaking an 1889 Glass Ceiling:

Laura J. Eisenhuth, first woman elected to statewide office in the United States



By Susan Wefald

In 1889 a constitution was drafted for North Dakota. The constitution provided that women could be elected to state school positions, and also established the office of state superintendent of Public Instruction as an elected official with a two-year term.

The 1889 Constitutional Convention also granted North Dakota women the right to vote, but only on school issues. It was a small, but important, step in the right direction. For the first time, North Dakota women could vote and run for election in a statewide race. This changed the political status quo and opened new professional doors for women including Laura Eisenhuth.

“...there ought to be at least one bright, active, public-spirited woman on every school board.”

Laura Eisenhuth, 1894¹

Laura J. Eisenhuth in 1893. Photo by W.H. DeGraff in Bismarck, ND. SHSND A1591-0001

Laura Eisenhuth, the first woman elected to statewide office in the United States, was thirty-three years old when she entered the State Capitol Building in Bismarck and took her oath of office on January 3, 1893.² Superintendent Eisenhuth was the fourth person to serve as state superintendent of Public Instruction in the new state of North Dakota.³ At the end of that busy first day, she sat down and wrote her first entry in the Superintendent's Record in which she recorded each day's activities:

"I, Laura J. Eisenhuth, took the oath of office and filed my official bond as State Supt. of Public Inst. Appointed Willis R. Bierly as Chief Clerk in the Dept. Received from my predecessor through Mr. Cathro the keys of the office and \$25.00 amt. due for Reading Circle Fund."⁴

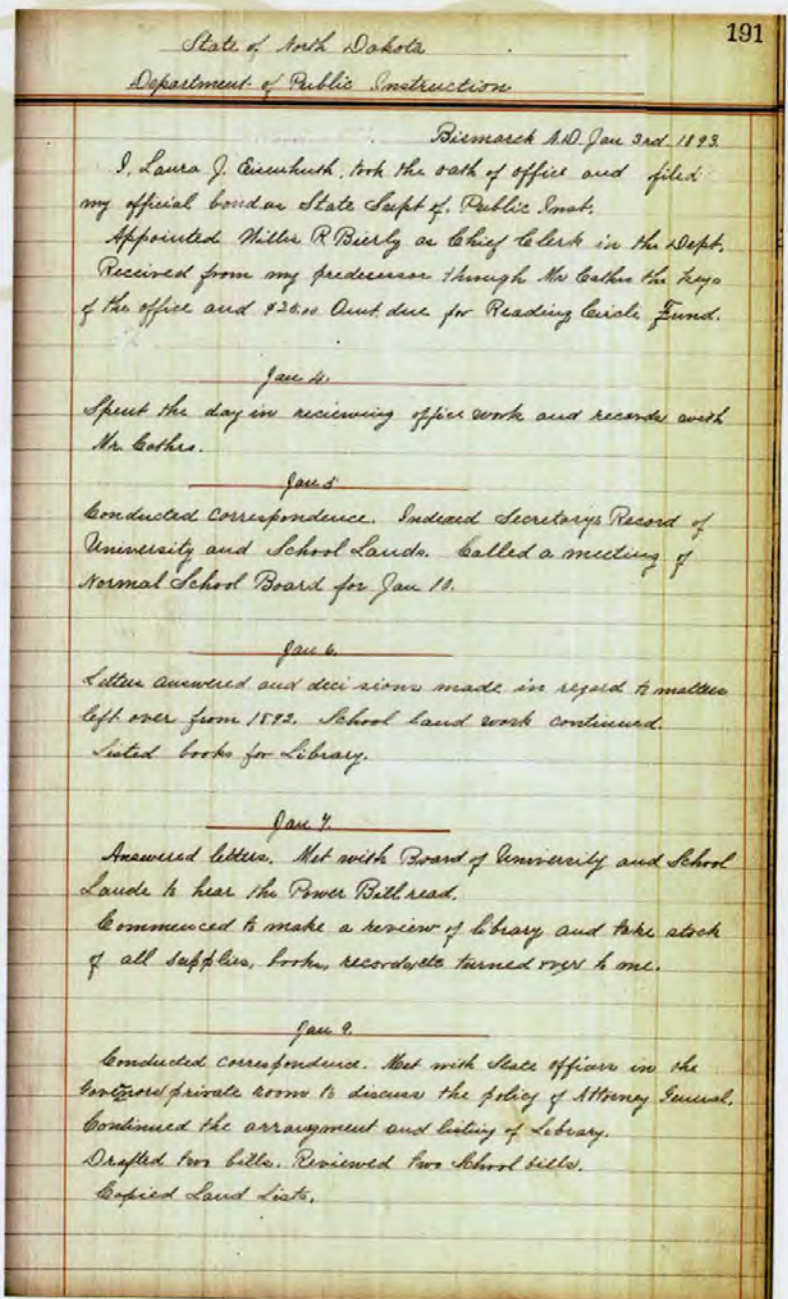
During her time in office she reorganized important office responsibilities and proposed many improvements to the state school system, some not enacted until after she left. Although Eisenhuth served only one term as superintendent of Public Instruction, she left a model of an efficient, energetic office holder for other women seeking political office.

An Experienced Teacher and County Superintendent

Laura Kelly Eisenhuth was born in Blenheim, Ontario, on May 29, 1859, the daughter of Thomas and Nancy Kelly.⁵ In 1863 her family moved to eastern Iowa and settled in DeWitt, where she grew up with her four siblings, Mary, Thomas, Fredrick, and Edward.⁶ An 1895 article in the Fargo paper, *The Record*, stated she was educated in the best schools of that state, but there is no mention in *The Record* or other sources that Laura attended any normal school (a two-year school, beyond high school, which provided teacher training) or college.⁷ For eleven years she was a successful teacher in the Iowa schools, starting teaching at the age of eighteen.

Laura Kelly, like many others, was drawn to northern Dakota Territory during the Great Dakota Boom, a period between 1878 and 1889 when the population of northern Dakota jumped from 16,000 to 191,000. She described her move to what would soon be North Dakota in a one-page autobiography written in 1937:

"My first trip to North Dakota was made in June 1885, and at that time [I] located on a pre-emption claim of 160 acres near New Rockford. Returned to duties as teacher at DeWitt High School that fall. Returned to North Dakota in the summer of 1886 and



Superintendent of Public Instruction Laura Eisenhuth wrote summaries of daily activities in her Superintendent's Record. This page is from her first few days in office. SHSND 31172

again in the summer of 1887, and in the fall of 1887 was married to Willis Eisenhuth."⁸

Laura Eisenhuth was twenty-nine years old that fall. Her husband, Willis H.B. Eisenhuth, known also as Joseph, was originally from Pennsylvania and worked as a farmer and druggist in Carrington.⁹ He was also a staunch Democrat.¹⁰ Eisenhuth later also described herself as a "member of the minority Democratic Party."¹¹

Two weeks after the couple settled in Carrington, the school board asked Eisenhuth to become the Carrington School teacher because the teacher hired that fall had quit. Eisenhuth took over a one-room school with a class of eighty students. Two weeks later the school board asked her to continue for the full school year. Years later Eisenhuth recalled, "They said I was doing splendidly and as

they employed a hired girl to do my housework I accepted."¹²

By June 1888 the *Carrington News* endorsed Eisenhuth for Foster County superintendent of schools, and in the June election, she won by a majority of four votes.¹³ She gave "so satisfactory an administration of the office that she was re-elected in 1890, carrying eleven of the thirteen election districts of the county."¹⁴

When Laura Eisenhuth was elected Foster County superintendent of schools in 1888 and 1890, she was following in the footsteps of Dakota Territory pioneer Linda Slaughter. Slaughter had first been appointed Burleigh County superintendent of schools in 1873, and then had been elected to that position in 1878-1882.¹⁶ In the years after Slaughter, other women were elected county superintendent. By 1888 there were about half a dozen women superintendents in northern Dakota Territory. Six years later, in 1894, when Eisenhuth was state superintendent of Public Instruction, she called attention to the fact that "we have now eleven lady county superintendents out of thirty-nine, and all doing excellent work; their natural aptitude to teach and their love for little children giving them a peculiar advantage."¹⁷

As noted above, women could be elected county superintendent of schools while Dakota was a territory. They had been voting in local school elections and on school issues since 1883. In 1889 a new constitution was drafted for the new state; article V, section 128 provided that women could now be elected to state school positions:

Any woman having the qualifications enumerated in section 121 of this article, as to age, residence and citizenship, and including those now qualified by the laws of the territory, may vote for all school officers, and upon all questions pertaining solely to school matters, and be eligible to any school office.¹⁸

A Personal Description



Laura Eisenhuth in 1895.
SHSND 008-150

A few personal descriptions of Laura Eisenhuth survive. Bertha Grant, a writer who knew Mrs. Eisenhuth, described her in 1894 in an article for *Western Womanhood*, the publication of the North Dakota Women's Christian Temperance Union. The article, titled "Wives and Daughters of the Administration," described her as: "tall and slight, with mild dark eyes, full of expression and soft, wavy brown hair. Her firm, cordial handclasp is earnest of her good will toward men and assure the visitor of her sincerity. Although a delicate and spiritual woman, Mrs. Eisenhuth has, to an unusual degree, the quality of patience and determination, and of fortitude. . . . Mrs.

Eisenhuth is, above all, a womanly woman, devoted to her husband, her business, and her home, and her personal magnetism is recognized by all so fortunate as to make her acquaintance. . . . She has a fondness and taste for painting and sketching, and when she has an occasional spare moment to devote to her own amusement it is given to her oils and pastels."¹⁵

Authors Comment

The difficulty in finding a category for an office-holding woman is evident, as well as the need to reassure readers that Eisenhuth remained a "womanly woman."

The 1889 Constitution also established the office of state superintendent of Public Instruction and determined the state superintendent would be an elected official with a two-year term. Now North Dakota women could vote and run for election in a statewide race. While county elections for school superintendent were usually held in June, state and congressional elections, including the state superintendent of Public Instruction, were in November.

The North Dakota Political Scene

Laura Eisenhuth entered North Dakota state politics at a volatile time. North Dakotans elected a different governor every two years during the

first ten years of statehood. Although Republicans won every election except one during that period, Republican conventions, dominated by the political boss Alexander McKenzie, regularly nominated new candidates to state office.

In 1890 the populists, prohibitionists, and members of the Farmers Alliance formed a third party – the Independent Party. The message this party offered voters included free silver, government loans on real estate and stored crops, woman's suffrage, and direct election of United States senators.¹⁹ The Independents endorsed Eisenhuth for state superintendent of Public Instruction. Because of her "success and popularity as an educator," she had already been nominated by the

Democratic state convention.²⁰ She may have been endorsed to attract new women voters to the Democratic and Independent parties, although women could not vote for any other offices on the state ticket.

In early October 1890, the Women's Christian Temperance Union held their first North Dakota convention in Jamestown. Susan B. Anthony, an icon of the woman's suffrage movement, was the featured speaker, and a large crowd gathered to hear her remarks. The *Jamestown Weekly Alert* reported, "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth, the first lady candidate on a North Dakota state ticket was then introduced . . . and was greeted with loud applause. She urged upon the ladies the necessity of voting in the upcoming election."²¹ This must have

been a thrilling moment for Eisenhuth. Her Republican opponent was John Ogden, a well-known educator in the state.²² Unfortunately for Eisenhuth, it was a Republican year in North Dakota politics. Ogden won, as did every Republican candidate for statewide office in 1890.²³

Laura Eisenhuth continued to build her statewide reputation as an educator during the next two years. John Ogden, the new state superintendent of Public Instruction, chose five state educational leaders to conduct one-week institutes (mandatory training sessions) for teachers throughout the state in 1891-92.²⁴ He selected Eisenhuth to conduct thirteen institutes. Conducting institutes provided her with the opportunity to demonstrate that

she was a leader in North Dakota educational circles. She was also elected vice president of the North Dakota Education Association in January 1891.²⁵

By June 1892 Laura Eisenhuth was in the thick of politics. She ran for a third term as Foster County superintendent, but lost the election by a few votes. She demanded a recount. The *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* reported, "Mrs. Eisenhuth appeared and demanded another canvas of the votes, including those of the disputed township. The auditor refused to make it, and the case was carried to the courts." In late summer, the judge ruled in favor of Eisenhuth. A recount was held, and she won by a majority of eight votes.²⁶

Also in mid-June of 1892, three

1889 Duties of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

- **Collect and disseminate information about education in the state.** The superintendent furnished all school offices with the registers and report forms required by law. The reports were used in preparing the superintendent's biennial report on education.
- **Prepare the "course of study" for the public schools.** This model curriculum was meant to provide a similar education for students all over the state. This was difficult to ensure when students in town attended graded schools through high school and rural students attended ungraded schools, usually one-room schoolhouses with one teacher for all grades.
- **Prepare examinations for teacher certificates, both county and state.** The state test generally had multiple questions on up to twenty-nine subjects. There were also three county grades of teacher's certificates in 1893-94. Technically, all applicants had to be at least eighteen years old.³⁶
- **Organize the county teacher institutes.**³⁷ One week of annual training was provided in each county to all teachers by the Department of Public Instruction. Most teachers in North Dakota had only completed high school and needed additional professional education. The department selected instructors and held the training programs. The state superintendent, or her deputy, tried to attend every institute in the state.
- **Choose books and write discussion questions for the teacher reading circles.** Teachers were encouraged to participate in "reading circles." The object of the circles was to "improve teachers in general culture and professional reading."³⁸
- **Conduct appeal hearings.** Decisions made by county superintendents, such as refusing to issue or revoking teacher certificates, could be appealed to the state superintendent of Public Instruction, who would make the final decision.
- **Chair the Normal School Board.** The board of trustees of the state normal schools (schools for training teachers) was composed of the governor, superintendent of Public Instruction, and members of the board of management of each school.³⁹
- **Manage state educational library** – The office of the superintendent was responsible for a professional library for teachers and county superintendents.
- **Serve as secretary of the Board of University and School Lands** – The board made decisions and kept the records for state lands dedicated to the support of education.

hundred people attended the Independent Party convention in Valley City. Eisenhuth was nominated for state superintendent of Public Instruction. ²⁷ She was also endorsed by the Democratic Party.²⁸ Her Republican opponent, J. M. Devine, superintendent of schools in La Moure County,²⁹ had also been chosen by John Ogden to participate in fifteen state institutes in 1892 as a "state lecturer," a featured speaker on the institute program.³⁰

In August 1892 Mr. Eisenhuth began publishing a Democratic newspaper, *The Citizen*, in Carrington. In the nine issues published between August 12 and December 2, 1892, Laura Eisenhuth edited and wrote material for the educational column. "Education should be above politics," she wrote in the first issue, "and it is my intention to keep this column so."³¹ She was true to her word, and in the issue previous to the election wrote only about how "Each office, its qualifications and duties should be taught in a non-partisan" manner.³²

Eli Shortridge, the Independent candidate for governor, campaigned vigorously. During the final days of the campaign, a worried Republican National Committee sent money to North Dakota to defeat the populists.³³ This effort was largely unsuccessful, as the Independent Party won every office except secretary of state.

Although the election was held on November 8, election results came in slowly in 1892. It took over a month to tally all of the votes. On December 16, the final abstract was printed in the *Bismarck Daily Tribune*. Laura Eisenhuth: 19,078; J. M. Devine: 17,343.³⁴

Superintendent Eisenhuth's First Month in Office

A week after election results were announced, Laura Eisenhuth was in Bismarck, preparing to settle in for her new duties. Finding a place to live was an early priority. On December 23, 1892, the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*

noted these comments of Eisenhuth:

"I find houses scarce and hardly know where to go. I presume we will be obliged to take temporary quarters this winter and wait until spring for a permanent location. When I located at Carrington, I hesitated between Carrington and Bismarck, but was finally urged by Senator Casey to locate at Carrington."³⁵

After only about a week in which to settle into a new home and city, she took office. With a staff of only two people, it was a daunting task for Superintendent Eisenhuth to take on the responsibilities of her department. During her first month, she hit the ground running, taking care of the myriad duties that confronted her as a state administrator. During that first month her work included drafting education bills, answering the questions of a legislative investigating committee, participating in meetings of the Board of University and School Lands and the Normal School Board. She also attended to administrative

functions such as sending out large mailings to school districts and county superintendents and organizing the state educational library. Juggling these duties required good administrative skills, which Eisenhuth had honed during her time as a county superintendent.

Every day Superintendent Eisenhuth was in office, she, or a person in her office, recorded a short notation of duties accomplished that day in a record book, now preserved in the State Archives in Bismarck. The record of the month of January 1894 is written by Eisenhuth. Her notations in her first month (January 4 through February 4, 1893) indicate she made a good start on important work she would continue to deal with throughout her term in office.⁴⁰ Excerpts from the Superintendent's Record are included to illustrate how she juggled these responsibilities, concentrating especially on her first month in office. Some later excerpts include activities from later in the year, such as teacher training.



Superintendent of Public Instruction Eisenhuth's office was located in the first capitol building before any additions were made. Bismarck became Dakota Territory's capital city in 1883 and continued to serve as the state's capital after statehood was established in 1889. The first capitol building was constructed of dark brick. SHSND 00070-0065

Board of University and School Lands

January 5 – Conducted correspondence. Indexed Secretary's Record of University and School Lands. Called a meeting of normal School Board for Jan 10.

Jan 30 – Conducted correspondence. Meeting of U and S Land Board. Meeting adjourned until Jan 31 10 A.M. owing to the illness of the Gov. Assorted letters in regards to bonds and lands and made list of lands for sale, lease & hay permits.

It was not business as usual for the Board of University and School Lands in January 1893. Questions had been raised about how the board issued bonds. A legislative committee had decided to investigate actions of the board under the previous administration.⁴¹ Superintendent Eisenhuth, as secretary of the board, had responsibility for the records of the board in 1893-94. She found them in disarray.⁴² The governor, the secretary of state, the attorney general, and the state auditor were also members of the board.

At the time of statehood, Congress endowed education in North Dakota with land grants, including two sections of every township under the jurisdiction of the Board of University and School Lands – 3,049,465 acres in all.⁴³ The legislature established a minimum sale price of ten dollars an acre, so the state had a potential education endowment of more than \$30,000,000.⁴⁴ In 1893-94, the Board of University and School Lands invested the income produced from renting or selling school lands in school district bonds, state bonds, and farm contracts.⁴⁵

In January Superintendent Eisenhuth did much of the record keeping herself, probably so she could become familiar with this important part of her work since she had to prepare information for the legislative investigating committee and prepare for and participate in board meetings. In her first month of office, she spent time on twenty-one days on board activities. In February she arranged

for a part-time clerk to do the record keeping.

The legislature had changes in mind. Even though the legislative investigating committee found “nothing crooked” when it ended its investigation and made its report in February 1893, by March 1893 the legislature had established a staffed Land Department with an appointed land commissioner.⁴⁶ Superintendent Eisenhuth had lobbied the legislature to place the school land responsibilities under the supervision of her office, but to no avail.⁴⁷ Eisenhuth continued her work as secretary of the board, which she found interesting but time consuming. In the first eighteen months of her term, there were 118 meetings of the Board of University and School Lands, and she attended all but three.⁴⁸

State Educational Library

Jan 9 – Conducted correspondence. Met with State officers in the Governors private room to discuss the policy of Attorney General. Continued the arrangement and listing of Library. Drafted two bills. Reviewed two School bills. Copied Land Lists.

The library Laura Eisenhuth refers to in the Superintendents Record is the State Educational Library, the lending library established by her predecessor for the use of teachers and county superintendents across

the state. Although there were some private lending libraries, there were no public libraries in North Dakota at that time--the first public library was established in 1897 in Grafton.⁴⁹

During her first month, Eisenhuth took on the project of arranging, listing and checking all books in the library. Her Superintendents Record entries show that she worked on tasks related to the library fourteen days in her first month in office, and on January 24 she wrote, “Finished checking library.” The next day she noted, “Found sixty six, 66, volumes missing.” It probably gave her great satisfaction to start and finish one part of her work in that hectic first month. However, difficulties with the educational library continued throughout her term. In late 1894 Superintendent Eisenhuth noted that the library

“is used wholly by the people of Bismarck, is a caricature on a state educational library, and is a great trouble to take care of with the limited clerk hire in this office. The State has no right to furnish a library and librarian for the benefit of any one city, and there have not been more than twenty-five people in the last two years who have taken biographies, histories, books of reference, or pedagogical works. The light literature and children's stories have been so thoroughly read that they are



Participants in the 1894 Cass County Teacher's Institute. Laura Eisenhuth is standing second from the left. Porterville Collection NDIRS MSS296.197.8

worn from use."⁵⁰

In 1907 the legislature established the Public Library Commission to provide state-wide library services. The state educational library and libraries maintained by other state agencies were incorporated into a single public library under the direction of the state superintendent of Public Instruction. Reorganized several times, it now exists as the North Dakota State Library and remains a division of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, under the direction of the state superintendent.

Working with the Legislature

Jan 12 - Helped draft a bill for the certification of the State Normal School graduates, and one for free text books.⁵¹ Conducted correspondence and continued work on School Lands and in Library.

Superintendent Eisenhuth started her term just as the 1893 legislature started its session. Like any new state official, she had to dive into the work of her office and take care of legislative matters. Her entries in the Superintendents Record reveal that she drafted bills (January 9, 11, 12, 14), reviewed bills (January 7, 9, 13, and Feb 2), turned over books and records to an investigating committee (January 25), notified county superintendents of school bills introduced (January 26), and was called into investigating committee rooms to turn over letters pertaining to school bonds (February 4). The legislative session kept her busy.

Later in her two-year term, she included legislative recommendations in her 1894 Biennial Report. One recommendation related to better sanitary conditions for pupils in the public schools.

"I cannot place too much emphasis upon the necessity for a law providing that every school house be furnished with separate outhouses . . . and that a system of inspection be made obligatory on the part of teachers and school officers. I . . . wish to call your attention to the fact

that our present law barely mentions them and provides no safeguard whatever. . . .

Number of schools having	
Only one privy, 1893	397
No privy, 1893	25

I need scarcely add anything to the figures given, they speak volumes as to the thoughtlessness of parents and officers upon the greatest moral question now affecting schools, and if the condition of those buildings could be reported you would be shocked to find the great wrong that is being done our innocent little ones in the most important time of their lives. . . . The abominations that are left standing from year to year at a school house, would not be tolerated for a single day at any decent home. This is not a subject alone for teachers to look after, but parents, and first of all legislators."⁵²

Superintendent Eisenhuth's strong words made a difference. In 1895 the new state superintendent drafted a bill which mandated two "convenient water closets or privies" for each school, "entirely separate from each other, and having separate means of access." School officers had to keep the same in a "clean, chaste and wholesome condition" or face removal from office or loss of state funds. The bill passed and went into effect immediately.⁵³

Correspondence in 1893

Jan 17 - Conducted correspondence. Filled orders Supt's Supplies. Continued library work. Prepared a mimeograph letter to clerks in regard to School Lands, sale of bonds and apportionment.⁵⁴

Jan 18 - Printed directed and folded six hundred of the letters to clerks. Conducted the usual correspondence. Filled orders for Co Supt's Supplies.

Preparing six hundred letters with such a small staff in the 1890s

OUTHOUSES.

I would here urgently call the teacher's attention to a growing evil that is abroad in all the land,—the filthy and vile condition of the school outhouses. I know of and have made complaint of school houses in this state where the outhouses were snowed full in winter, and too vile to enter in summer, leaving the pupils without the proper means to obey the calls of nature the whole day. No wonder that their brains are inactive, their digestion impaired and their circulation sluggish. And not only are they pest houses where disease is germinated, but they are immoral influences that burn and blacken the pure young souls of innocent children, and perpetuate and strengthen the evil in evil. This is no place for false modesty to prevent action. The law provides for these buildings, and it is your duty as teachers to see that the school where you teach has comfortable and convenient buildings, and then are kept clean and free from all kinds of drawings and writings. All over the land is going up a cry against these moral and physical abominations. Let North Dakota lead the van in purging and purifying them, and through them the health and morals of our children. This is a call to duty. I request county superintendents in visiting schools in their counties to make inspection, not only of the outhouses, but of the school walls, and make note of their condition to use in granting certificates where the fault is the teacher's, or reporting to the school boards for improvement.

I would acknowledge most gratefully my indebtedness to the Hon. Oliver E. Wells, State Superintendent of Wisconsin, and thank him most sincerely for his prompt and kindly courtesy, and to all State and County Superintendents who responded with publications and suggestions.

I have gone over every line of this Course very carefully changing where the different conditions of our state demanded change, and where my knowledge of the country schools suggested a difference in matter or outline.

And I now respectfully submit it to the teachers, trusting it will aid them in grading, classifying and improving the schools of our state.

Very sincerely,
LAURA J. EISENHUTH.

Superintendent Eisenhuth advocated for more sanitary school outhouses in 1894. SHSND 372 N811 1894N p99

was a significant task. And that was only half of the letters that had to be mailed to the 1,199 school district clerks in 1893. Today, with modern technology, it is difficult to imagine the offices in the State Capitol Building in the 1890s. They were equipped with steam heat, a telephone, typewriters, and mimeograph machines.⁵⁵ Offices were lit by kerosene or gas lamps and had wooden floors and oak furniture.

Telephone service was only available locally, since communities in the state were not connected by telephone lines. Therefore, almost all communication was by mail. Eisenhuth noted every day in the *Record* "letters answered" or "conducted correspondence." The mail was her only communication link with the county superintendents and other constituents across the state, and good communication was a vital component of her job.

Superintendent Eisenhuth's Staff

Jan 14 – Had interview with Gov. Shortridge in regard to deputy and clerk. Answered letters. Continued work on library and School Lands. Mailed biennial reports at Mr. Cathro's request. Drafted bill for teachers' institutes.

Feb 4 – Mr. Bierly severed connection with this office and returned to Grand Forks. Called into investigating committee rooms to turn over letters pertaining to school bonds. Conducted correspondence. Appointed Mr. Eisenhuth my deputy by sanction of Governor to date from Feb. 1st. Was empowered to employ clerk to be paid from Interest and Income Fund to do the work of the U. and S. Land Board. Referred the despoiling of timber claims to Atty. Gen. Standish.”

One of the most important duties of an office holder, though not often recognized in historical accounts, is dealing with staff needs. On January 14, 1893, Laura met with the governor to discuss the staffing needs of her department, and changes followed quickly.⁵⁶ The Superintendent's Record entry of January 24 included, “discharged and paid Miss Bearer.”⁵⁷

Miss Bearer was a hold-over from the previous administration. It was not unusual for a new state official with a different party affiliation to replace employees in the office. In this case, Superintendent Eisenhuth was a Democrat, and she needed people around her she knew she could trust.⁵⁸ Miss Bearer's replacement is first mentioned on May 5: “Dictated correspondence to Miss Gray.”⁵⁹ The descriptions of Miss Gray's work in the Record reveal that Miss Gray was a great help with the work of the Department of Public Instruction, including being “in charge” of the office when the superintendent and her husband travelled to the Chicago World's Fair for nineteen days in 1893.⁶⁰

On February 4, 1893, Eisenhuth wrote that Willis Bierly, whom she had appointed chief clerk/assistant superintendent of the department on her first day in office, January 3, 1893, “severed his connection with this office and returned to Grand Forks.”⁶¹ He had only served her administration for one month, and may have been hired on an interim basis.⁶² The same

day Laura noted, “Appointed Mr. Eisenhuth my deputy by sanction of Governor to date from Feb. 1st.

The Record indicates Deputy Eisenhuth helped Laura visit school districts all over the state. By fall 1894, the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* wryly noted when Mr. Eisenhuth attended an institute in Ellendale, “Mrs. Eisenhuth is to be congratulated upon the possession of a husband to whom she can entrust her political interests upon an occasion of this kind.”⁶³ Superintendent Eisenhuth was not the only state official at the capitol in 1893 to hire a family member as staff. Attorney General William Standish and State Treasurer Knud Nomland both hired their wives as staff members as well. As a result of this practice, Republicans raised nepotism as a campaign issue in the 1894 election.⁶⁴

Superintendent Eisenhuth was convinced that the Department of Public Instruction needed more employees. One early addition was noted on February 4, 1893: “Was empowered to employ clerk to be paid from Interest and Income Fund to do the work of the U. and S. Land Board.”⁶⁵ On February 6 she wrote, “James Murphy worked ½ day as clerk in writing letters to applicants for purchase of bonds.” This was followed by similar entries on February 7 and 8.⁶⁶ James Murphy is not mentioned again in the Record, but he was probably the clerk hired to assist the superintendent with her University and School Lands work. Eisenhuth continued to press for a larger staff. In the 1894 Biennial Report she wrote:

“The duties of this office are onerous in the extreme. Few realize the amount of work, real plodding, continuous work attached to, and inseparable from, the office of State Superintendent in this State. The duties of the secretary of the Board of University and School Lands require, and should have, the entire time of one efficient experienced person. And there can be no greater mistake than so limiting the

Balancing Work with Other Interests

Superintendent Eisenhuth did have a life outside of the capitol building. In Bertha Grant's 1894 article, “Wives and Daughters of the Administration,” she reassures readers that Laura Eisenhuth still had a proper social life.

“Mrs. Laura J. Eisenhuth, our State superintendent of education, has official duties that occupy nearly all the hours of daylight, but when she leaves the Capitol Mrs. Eisenhuth has a social life that is as dear to her friends as it can be to herself. Her public life, so rich in its results and so far reaching in its influence, we mention only as an example of the broad educational and moral strength so highly developed in her character.

“Notwithstanding her official duties, Mrs. Eisenhuth directs the affairs of her household, and manages to have congenial spirits meet with her at dinner or during evenings, and is a delightful hostess.”⁶⁸

The Eisenhuths also managed a few vacations during her term in office. In August 1893 the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* reported that Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhuth joined a party of twelve, including Governor Eli and Anna Shortridge and their daughters, for a camping trip to Spirit Lake. They took a train from Bismarck for the several-days trip.⁶⁹ In October 1893 the Eisenhuths also traveled to the Chicago World's Fair, where Laura participated in “North Dakota Day” on October 10, along with many other state officials.⁷⁰

clerical force so that the State Superintendent is compelled to do clerical duty as has been the necessity since statehood. The educational work of the State would be much more satisfactory if the State Superintendent could be free to supervise every branch of the work in the State, visiting, encouraging, exciting the workers in each county, strengthening weak places, kindly pointing out errors, gathering comparisons, and ideas for still greater advancement, and studying the systems of other states in order to keep our own in the front ranks."⁶⁷

Traveling the State to Visit School Districts

June 8 – Conducted Correspondence. Mr. Eisenhuth went to Dickinson Institute. Mrs. Eisenhuth visited Minnewauken Institute and addressed school officers in the afternoon and citizens in the evening.

Connecting with people face to face is an important part of the life of any state official, and Superintendent Eisenhuth made sure that she or her deputy attended educational events all over the state. Entries in the Superintendent's Record in early June 1893 indicate that Superintendent Eisenhuth and her deputy had a busy travel schedule, especially when you consider that they were using train or horse and buggy as transportation!

For example, on June 6, Eisenhuth spent the morning in Pembina, about 350 miles north east of Bismarck, and travelled sixty-five miles south to Grand Forks for the evening. On June 7 she travelled seventy-six miles west to Devils Lake where she attended the Devils Lake Institute and that evening presented diplomas to the graduating class. On June 8 the state superintendent travelled twenty miles west to the Minnewauken institute and addressed school officers there in the afternoon and citizens in the evening. On June 9 she travelled 180 miles back to Bismarck. During the same time period, Deputy Eisenhuth

spent June 6 in Cooperstown, 160 miles northeast of Bismarck. On June 7 he travelled sixty miles southwest to attend an institute at Jamestown. On June 8, he travelled 200 miles west to attend the Dickinson institute.

Superintendent Eisenhuth's Recommendations

Along with continuing the responsibilities examined above, an additional duty in 1894 was the development of a five-hundred-page biennial report, filed at the end of 1894, which gave an update on the state of the public school system in North Dakota. The report included thirty-three pages of Superintendent Eisenhuth's recommendations to improve education in the state and enables us to understand her concerns at the end of her two-year term. Her recommendations were extensive and covered more than thirty different topics including discrepancies she found when examining financial reports of the Dakota Territory superintendents of Public Instruction. The recommendations of her predecessor and the superintendent that followed her each covered only half the topics of Superintendent Eisenhuth.

Laura Eisenhuth did not mince

words when she made recommendations. Whether her practice of using strong words, as demonstrated in this report, contributed to her defeat in the election is subject to debate. The report's main audience was the governor, the legislature, and county school superintendents. As a public document, it was also available to any member of the public who was aware of and requested to read it. Excerpts are included below.

"I wish to call attention not only to the strongest points in our system but to truthfully cite our weakest points with such suggestions as can only come from one whose thoughts and interests have for two years been completely centered upon this work. . . . If I cut deep in places I do so with the same intent and purpose that a wise physician probes a wound."⁷¹

COMPULSORY EDUCATION

"Our compulsory education law is almost a dead letter. . . . You will notice by the statistical report that there are 2,375 children who did not attend any school during the year ending June 30, 1892 and 2,139 who did not attend any school in 1893. . . . If the law could be so changed as to have the teacher . . . report at the end of the term, all pupils that have not



Most North Dakota children in the 1890s attended rural one-room schools. At McKenzie School, Burleigh County, students pose outside their school house in 1895. SHSND 11048-08

attended the required twelve weeks and the district be deprived of the pro rata apportionment for every pupil of required age not attending and not excused."⁷²

HEALTH OF PUPILS

"Our school houses in a majority of district schools have been built without regard to ventilation. The one thought has been to keep them warm and as a result the children sit through the winter term with hot heads and cold feet, breathing in vitiated air.

. . . It is imperative that a plan of a one-room building lighted, heated, and ventilated properly, be furnished by the State, and that school boards be compelled to build all new school houses according to this plan as soon as possible and to re-arrange old buildings so that they can be properly heated, ventilated and lighted."⁷³

KINDERGARTEN

"I would respectfully recommend that a kindergarten be established, in connection with every public school, in villages of 300 inhabitants and over.⁷⁴ . . . Our kindergarten schools, to be effective in elevating the masses, must be free.⁷⁵ . . . And what a boon to the laboring mother, who leaves her helpless little ones while she earns their scant clothing and living, fear for their safety, adding to her over-burdened hands the haste of anxiety."⁷⁶

SCHOOL DISTRICT OFFICERS

"There are in the state 1199 school districts...That the school district board shall consist of three members...And here I would add that there ought to be at least one bright, active, public-spirited woman on every school board."⁷⁷



Emma Bates defeated Eisenhuth in the 1894 campaign. SHSND 0361-012

1894 Campaign

This must have been quite the campaign. Laura Eisenhuth, the incumbent state superintendent of Public Instruction, was a known leader in educational circles. She was again nominated by the Independent and Democrat Parties in the summer of 1894. Emma Bates was nominated in July by the Republican Party and endorsed by the Prohibition Party. Bates was on the faculty of the Valley City Normal School in the Department of English, Literature, and Latin. She had many other professional credentials in education as well. Both of the women came to North Dakota in 1887. Seven years later they were vying to be the state's highest education officer.

Both were known to be excellent public speakers. An 1894 article in *Western Womanhood* said of Bates, "With measured speech, and countenance aglow with the interest of her subject, she holds the attention of every hearer and seldom fails to send home the shafts of conviction to the heart."⁷⁸ Both women were well known around the state in educational

circles, and both received their State Professional Certificates (valid for life) in November 1892. Only twenty-four people in the state had earned this certificate.⁷⁹ In 1891-92 both had been chosen by State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Ogden to conduct county institutes around the state. By the time the 1894 election rolled around, Laura and Emma were well acquainted with each other.

Both women were busy that fall addressing audiences. *Western Womanhood* reported Eisenhuth "has been delivering some interesting addresses in different parts of the state."⁸⁰ The Women's Christian Temperance Union invited the two candidates to speak at their North Dakota convention. Eisenhuth spoke on "The Child in the Home and School." Bates spoke on "Motherhood."⁸¹ Just like today, organizations liked to give their members a chance to hear both candidates.

Laura Eisenhuth lost the election to Emma Bates in November: Emma Bates – 26,089, Laura Eisenhuth – 20,268.⁸² The Republicans swept back into office winning every state wide election.⁸³

Although she lost the election, Superintendent Eisenhuth was recognized for the work she had done while in office. In December, members of the North Dakota Education Association presented her with an "elegant solid silver tea tray, sugar bowl, creamer, and spoon holder with a set of spoons."⁸⁴ In 1895, *The Record*, a North Dakota magazine, noted that Laura Eisenhuth gave "an able and conscientious administration of her office, earning the warmest commendation from the other members of the state administration as an untiring officer and a most efficient executive officer. North Dakota was the first state to choose a woman for an office so high, to a position so responsible, and the people of the state were not dissatisfied with the experiment, as evidenced by their votes at the last election."⁸⁵

After Leaving Office

After her term of office ended, the Eisenhuths moved back to Foster County. Laura Eisenhuth must have been disappointed when she lost, because she ran for state superintendent of Public Instruction in 1896. She was endorsed by the Fusionists, the coalition of Independents and Democrats who hoped to wrest control from the Republicans. This time she had two opponents, Emma Bates, who did not get the Republican endorsement and ran as the Prohibition Party candidate, and John Halland, Republican. Laura made a good showing, but she lost the election by more than 5,000 votes: John Halland – 26,912, Laura Eisenhuth – 21,427, Emma Bates – 3011.⁸⁶

Laura Eisenhuth did not run for state office in 1898, but she ran one last time in 1900 as an Independent-Democrat. Her opponent was J. M. DeVine, whom she had beaten in the 1892 race, and who recently had served briefly as governor. She lost the election: DeVine 40,828 votes, Eisenhuth 25,493 votes.⁸⁷ In all, Laura Eisenhuth had run in five statewide races for superintendent of Public Instruction and been active in North Dakota politics for more than ten years.

Laura and Willis Eisenhuth had no children. In 1902, when she was forty-four years old, her husband died after an extended illness.⁸⁸ In September 1903 the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* reported, "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth is assistant principal of the high school at Carrington."⁸⁹ A few years later she married Ludwig Alming, a farmer near Carrington, and in 1909 the couple moved to Medford, Oregon, where Laura lived until her death on September 30, 1937. She was seventy-eight years old.⁹⁰

On Being the First Woman Elected to Statewide Public Office in the United States



SHSND 372 N811 1894N

Laura Eisenhuth brought to the job of superintendent of Public Instruction a keen mind, strong administrative skills, and the practical experience of being a classroom teacher and county superintendent. In 1893 and 1894 she wrote new curriculums for the teacher institutes, which were well received. Her goal was to share methods, facts, and broad new ideas with the institute participants.⁹¹ She wrote a new course of study for schools across the state.⁹² She encouraged "young people's reading circles." With two professors of education, she drew up a recommended list of books for students of all reading levels for this

project.⁹³ She prepared an indexed comprehensive biennial report which contains a treasure trove of information about education in the early days of North Dakota. She was a very dedicated and informed secretary of the Board of University and School Lands, and she submitted the first biennial report of the board, which included her thoughtful recommendations.⁹⁴

Laura Eisenhuth wrote the following words just before she retired from state office. She understood while she was serving the people of North Dakota that she was "making history."

"Being the first woman to hold a position of this kind I have realized that even my warmest friends have looked upon my work as an experiment, and that the novelty of my position might have made my relationship with the other officers strange and constrained; that such has not been the case in any instance is a matter of deep gratitude to me. I have endeavored to discharge the duties of this office with an eye single to the benefit of education and in such a manner that it would reflect credit upon womankind; that I have been successful in even a greater degree than I had hoped for. I have been warmly assured.

For two years, I have given all the thought, energy, and enthusiasm I could command to the discharge of my duties. The work has been to me a source of great pleasure and satisfaction.

I retire from office with a very great interest in the progress of our schools, with a warm friendship for my fellow educators, and a sincere desire for the welfare of the State and the prosperity of her people.

The appropriation for clerk hire is insufficient, but by strict economy and extra labor on my own part, and the kindness of the Board of U.&S. Lands, it has not been overdrawn.

There is no deficiency and a balance in the travelling expense fund reverts to the treasury.

Respectfully, submitted,

Laura J. Eisenhuth,

*State Superintendent of Public Instruction*⁹⁵



Susan Wefald was the first woman to serve on the North Dakota Public Service Commission. Appointed to the commission by Governor Edward Schafer in 1992, she was elected to three more terms and served on the commission for sixteen years. She now enjoys serving on non-profit boards, playing her violin with the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony, reading, gardening, and writing. Her book, *Spectacular North Dakota Hikes – Bring the Dog* (2011) received the Notable Documents Award from the North Dakota Library Association. She and her husband, Bob, enjoy exploring the state and learning more about North Dakota history. This article forms part of the book *Important Voices, North Dakota's Women Elected State Officials Share Their Stories, 1893-2013* by Susan Wefald, which will soon be published by the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

ENDNOTES

1. *Third Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota* (Jamestown: Alert, State Printers and Binders, 1894), 22. In 2013, North Dakota had 181 school districts. Twelve districts did not have women serving on their school boards. Don Martinson (North Dakota School Boards Association) in discussion with the author, January 2013.
2. "State Fact Sheet – North Dakota," Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University, last modified January, 2013, http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/resources/state_fact_sheets/ND.php
3. William Mitchell served from November 1889 to March 1890, when he died unexpectedly. W.J. Clapp was appointed to fill the position in April 1890 and served through December 1891. John Ogden was elected in November 1890, and served in 1891-92.
4. *Superintendent of Public Instruction Administration Superintendent's Record 1887-1897*, Series 1172, State Historical Society of North Dakota, State Archives, 191.
5. "Autobiography of Laura J. Eisenhuth Alming," Historical Data Project, Pioneer Biography Files (Series 30529), State Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota.
6. Ibid. Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *1880 United States Census* [database on-line], accessed February 6, 2013, <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com>; also, "Women of the State," *Western Womanhood*, September, 1894, 6.
7. "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth," *The Record* (Fargo, ND) June, 1895, 8.
8. "Autobiography of Laura J. Eisenhuth Alming."
9. "Eisenhuth Dead," *The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican* (Fargo, North Dakota), May 15, 1902, evening edition, 10, and "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth returns from Eastern Trip," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, November 3, 1893, 8.
10. "City News," *Jamestown Alert*, January 6, 1887, 8.
11. "Autobiography of Laura J. Eisenhuth Alming."
12. Ibid.
13. "Honor the Better Sex," *Carrington News*, June 7, 1888, 8; "Minnewauken Siftings," *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, July 5, 1888, 8.
14. "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth," *The Record* (Fargo, North Dakota), June, 1895, 8.
15. Bertha Grant, "Wives and Daughters of the Administration," *Western Womanhood* (Buffalo, North Dakota), July, 1894, 1.
16. *North Dakota History*, Unit 4: Set 1 – Woman's Suffrage at Statehood-Debates of the Constitutional Convention, (Bismarck; State Historical Society of North Dakota, 2013).
17. *Third Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota*, 29-30.
18. *The North Dakota Blue Book*, (Bismarck: Tribune, State Printers and Binders, 1897) 25.
19. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 221.
20. "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth," *The Record* (Fargo, North Dakota), June, 1895, 8.
21. "Temperance Work," *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, October 2, 1890, 2.
22. Ibid., 8.
23. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 221.
24. *Second Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota* (Bismarck: Tribune, State Printers and Binders, 1892), 325-326.
25. *Second Biennial Report*, 691.
26. "Judge has Rendered Decision in Foster County," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, September 2, 1892, 4.
27. "Will Name a Full Ticket," *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, June 18, 1892, 3; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 223.
28. "Ticket," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, October 21, 1892, 2. Her name appeared on the ballot twice, as both an Independent and Democrat.
29. *Second Biennial Report*, 125.
30. Ibid., 257.
31. "Educational Column," *The Citizen*, August 12, 1892, 8.
32. "Educational Column," (Carrington, North Dakota), *The Citizen* November 4, 1892, 8.
33. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 223.
34. "Abstract of Votes Cast in the State of North Dakota, at the General Election, November 8th, 1892," *The Bismarck Daily Tribune*, December 16, 1894, 4.
35. United States Senator Lyman Casey was from Carrington and served from 1889-93.
36. *Second Biennial Report*, 360-61, 422-23.
37. An excellent description of an institute conducted by Mrs. Eisenhuth

- can be found in "A Breezy Budget," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, June 3, 1892, 5.
38. *Second Biennial Report*, 13.
 39. *Fourth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota*, 342.
 40. *Superintendent's Record*, 191-95.
 41. "And Nothing Crooked," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, February 17, 1893, 3.
 42. *First Biennial Report of the Secretary of the Board of University and School Lands and Report of the Land Commissioner for the Period Ending June 30, 1894* (Jamestown, Alert, State Printers and Binders 1894) 4.
 43. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 299. Each section is one square mile. There are thirty-six square miles in a township.
 44. *Ibid.*, 214.
 45. *Third Biennial Report*, 10-11.
 46. "And Nothing Crooked," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, February 17, 1893, 3.
 47. *First Biennial Report of the Secretary of the Board of University and School Lands and Report of the Land Commissioner*, 4.
 48. *Ibid.*, 8.
 49. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 324.
 50. *Third Biennial Report*, 31.
 51. Superintendents Laura Eisenhuth, John Ogden, and Emma Bates all advocated for free text books for all students in the state, paid for by district or state funds.
 52. *Third Biennial Report*, 13-15.
 53. *Fourth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota*, 59
 54. An apportionment was a distribution of funds to each school district.
 55. George F. Bird and Edwin Taylor, Jr., *History of the City of Bismarck North Dakota, The First 100 Years, 1872-1972*, (Bismarck: Bismarck Centennial Association, 1972), 80.
 56. Superintendent Eisenhuth made her own staff decisions as a state official. The governor did not have the power to endorse or nix these decisions.
 57. *Superintendent's Record*, 193.
 58. Emma Bates, a Republican who succeeded Mrs. Eisenhuth, did this also.
 59. *Superintendent's Report*, 204.
 60. *Ibid.*, 213-217
 61. *Ibid.*, 195
 62. "Notes and Comments," *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, February 9, 1893, 7.
 63. "Mrs. Laura Eisenhuth's husband was in Ellendale," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, September 14, 1894, 4.
 64. "Opposes Such Politics," *Fargo Forum*, September 22, 1894, 1.
 65. *Superintendent's Report*, 195.
 66. *Ibid.*, 195-96
 67. *Third Biennial Report*, 39.
 68. Bertha Grant, "Wives and Daughters of the Administration," *Western Womanhood* (Buffalo, North Dakota), July, 1894, 1.
 69. "Off to Spiritwood," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, August 4, 1893, 3.
 70. *North Dakota at the World's Columbian Exposition*, (Chicago: Authority, 1893) 83.
 71. *Third Biennial Report*, 10
 72. *Ibid.*, 15-16.
 73. *Ibid.*, 17-18. There was an increase of 19,611 children of school age during 1893 and 1894, and 202 new school houses built to accommodate the increase. *Third Biennial Report*, 9.
 74. In 2013, North Dakota has 181 school districts. In 2012-13 school-year, full-day kindergarten was provided in 173 districts, half-day kindergarten in 3 districts. Sherry Sayler (Management Information Systems, State of North Dakota Department of Public Instruction), in memo to the author, January 2013.
 75. There was one free, publicly funded kindergarten in Fargo in 1894. *Third Biennial Report*, 405.
 76. *Third Biennial Report*, 19-20.
 77. *Ibid.*, 20, 22.
 78. "Miss Emma Bates," *Western Womanhood* (Buffalo, North Dakota), September, 1894, 2.
 79. *Fourth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of North Dakota*, 164.
 80. "Women of the State," *Western Womanhood* (Buffalo, North Dakota), October 1894, 5.
 81. "Women's Christian Temperance Union, The State Convention," *Western Womanhood*, October 1894, 6-7.
 82. "Abstract of Votes by Counties, Cast at the General Election held November 6th, 1894 for the various State Officers, as returned by the several County Auditors," *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), December 20, 1894, 1.
 83. *Ibid.*
 84. "At Hillsboro," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, January 4, 1895, 8.
 85. "Mrs. Laura J. Eisenhuth," *The Record* (Fargo, North Dakota), June, 1895, 8.
 86. "Official Canvas of the Votes Cast at the General Election in North Dakota November 3, 1896," *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, (Bismarck, North Dakota), December 18, 1896, 2.
 87. "Vote of North Dakota by Counties 1900, Returned to Secretary of State," *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, December 24, 1900, 4.
 88. "Eisenhuth Dead," *The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican* (Fargo, North Dakota), May 15, 1902, evening edition, 10.
 89. "Mrs Laura Eisenhuth is Assistant Principal," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, September 28, 1903, 3.
 90. "Early-Day Head of N.D. Schools Dies in Oregon," *Fargo Forum*, (Fargo, North Dakota), October 1, 1937, morning edition, 1.
 91. *Third Biennial Report*, 166.
 92. *Third Biennial Report*, 27.
 93. *Third Biennial Report*, 417.
 94. *First Biennial Report of the Secretary of the Board of University and School Lands*, 8.
 95. *Third Biennial Report*, 41-42.