

1850s – 1960s: Clearwater schools' fortunes grow, decline as society changes

In its early years, Clearwater was something of a traffic center. Steamboat traffic flourished on the upper Mississippi River, beginning in 1850, with regular trips between the Falls of St. Anthony and Sauk Rapids. A railroad was completed to Clearwater in January 1882 and then on to St. Cloud.

Clearwater's first school met in the winter of 1857-1858, under the direction of A. C. Powers, according to an 1881 History of Wright County, MN. Some say the first school was in an old building, first used as a store, or that a log cabin housed the first organized school in Clearwater in 1860, replaced a year later by a new building." One source says, "the first Clearwater Public School was held across the Mill Pond in (what is now) the Sportsmen's Park. Classes were in a shanty, which had been erected for a groggery (tavern). Children from Clearwater and Lynden Township attended."

The first building erected for a school, in 1860, was north across the street from the present post office. The building later housed Clearwater's first Catholic Church. It seems the 1860 structure was replaced by a new, two-story one in 1871. That was remodeled in 1906, in preparation for organizing high school classes.

1932 saw the last high school graduating class. Eleven grades were maintained through 1939, while the seniors went to Clear Lake, Annandale and St. Cloud. High school was discontinued in the spring of 1940. In the fall of 1940, a bus was hired from the St. Cloud Bus Lines to transport high school students to St. Cloud Technical High. School District No. 17 purchased its first school bus in 1944. After the fall of 1957, rural grade-school pupils were transported. Beginning in the fall of 1966, the seventh and eighth graders attended South Junior High in St. Cloud.

Before closing the school and selling it at auction, a public tour was hosted in the summer of 1969. Independent School District 742 (St. Cloud) sold the building site, the two-story frame building and a one-stall block garage at public auction in July 1969. Also on the auction block were school lunch tables and benches, two upright pianos, teachers' and students' desks, a milk dispenser and other miscellaneous items. Former mayor Curtis Heaton reports that Vernon Lumley purchased the school bell, which is currently on display in front of the Clearwater City Hall today.

Ownership of the building changed hands several times. While Wallace and Dorothy Houle owned it, it was converted into an 11-unit apartment building. Thomas and Beverly Allen are the current owners.

A document recorded by Winnie Frank affirms that J. Kingsley of Vermont was the first Clearwater-school teacher (1856-57), with A. C. Powers, Miss Harvey and Sara Longworth also among the first teachers. Other early teachers included James A. Wharton and M. H. Smith, 1888; Sarah Whiting, 1899-1906.

The superintendent's salary in 1892 was \$50, and teachers were paid \$20 and \$25.

A leaflet dated 1882-83 from the Clearwater Graded School shows that the school had three departments: Primary (listing 41 students), Intermediate (listing 46) and Higher (listing 45). The principal was A. W. Lane, with H. A. Stevens and Adell M Townsend as assistants. The leaflet also named 54 students who made up the Higher Department in 1881-82.

Three students received high school diplomas during the 1911 annual commencement exercises. The stage of the Assembly Hall was "very prettily decorated" to represent an outdoor scene, according to a newspaper article. After an elaborate processional, an invocation and a song by the High School Chorus, each of the three graduates spoke. Miss Anna M. Masuch, Miss Jessie M. Shattuck and Miss Florence V. Evans delivered their essays, respectively titled "Progress of Man," "Value of Literature" and "Uses of Beauty." The newspaper item asserted: "All the graduates had their parts well in hand and delivered them in an admirable manner.

Others who served at the school included Jay C. Miller, a long-time janitor between the 1930s and 1950s and Jim Hansen, who was a janitor some time after Miller. From 1954 until 1969, Al Abeln drove the school bus to pick up students in the rural areas. Jim Hansen, Chris Hansen's brother, was a bus driver in the early years, as well as a janitor. Later, Chuck Spencer drove bus. Chris (C.R.) Hansen and Doug Raw occasionally took class pictures. Lloyd Laughton recorded a lot of school history.

