



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

Clearwater settles, establishes its identity

Clearwater Township was first settled in 1855, four or five years after Samuel E. Carrick established a trading post and began Wright County’s first farm, near the Mississippi River, in what is now Otsego Township.¹

The first permanent settler in Clearwater was Selah Markham, a New York state native, who built a cabin in the fall of 1854. An 1881 *History of Wright County* names several other early settlers, adding: “During the years 1855-56 many settlers were added, and a thriving community sprung up as if by magic.”²

The boundaries of Wright County were established February 20, 1855; and Governor Willis A. Gorman appointed three county commissioners. Clearwater Township was organized in 1858.

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

In 1855, Clearwater and Monticello were sites of Wright County’s first postal service, with mail brought by ferry from the stage route on the opposite bank of the Mississippi River.¹

Early settlers foster education

Wright County’s educational system was organized in 1854, with the founding of the Monticello Academy by E. W. Merrill and his sister (name not identified). The earliest schools were established along the natural highways of travel along the Mississippi in Monticello, Otsego, Silver Creek and Clearwater, and along the Crow River (in Frankfort and Franklin townships.)¹

An assessment of the county’s early progress in education is found in a sketch by Charles S. Bryant in an 1881 *History of Wright County*. Bryant writes: “That the first settlers of Wright County were alive to the

importance of fostering an educational interest, is evident from their early efforts in that direction. The three voting Precincts first established were each made a school district, and the formation of other districts were among the first subdivisions following. Crude, though comfortable buildings were erected, and schools maintained, usually without taxation, voluntary contributions being the rule. The first notable impetus given was the general act granting two sections in each township for school purposes, though in most cases, little aid was realized from this source.”

“Yet, through all the varied fortunes of the pioneer and later settlements, this all-important element has been carefully nursed, until now, not a child within the borders of the county is without the means of a common school education. The village schools offer additional facilities. . . .

“From 1860, until the office of County Superintendent was established, each Commissioner district had its School Examiner; since then all have been under the supervision of the Superintendent, whose duties each year are becoming more arduous.”²

Clearwater school structures frame a growing system

Clearwater’s first school was held in the winter of 1857 and 1858, under the direction of A. C. Powers, according to the 1881 *History of Wright County, MN*.²

“The sum of \$213.00 was voted by the Town Board for school purposes and expenses of the current year,” asserts a 1969 “History Highlites” brochure, written on the occasion of the closing of the 1871 school building.³

Accounts vary as to the first school building. The 1881 *History of Wright County*² and Winnie’s/Elaine’s account ⁷ both record that the first schoolhouse was an old building, first used as a store. In contrast, a 1969 “History Highlites” brochure says that a log cabin housed the first organized school in Clearwater in 1860, replaced a year later by a new building. . . .³ In another commentary, “the first Clearwater Public School was held across the Mill Pond in (what is now) the Sportsmen’s Park. Classes were held in a shanty, which had been erected for a groggery (tavern). Children from both Clearwater and Lynden Township attended.”⁷

The first building erected for a school, in 1860, was north across the street from the present (2013) post office. The building was later used as the first Catholic Church in Clearwater.⁷ Another account agrees with this and adds that the 1860 building was replaced by a new, two-story building in 1871.⁵ The 1871 structure was the first two-story building of its kind to be erected in Wright County.³ This (1871) building is described in the 1881 *History of Wright County*: “A good two-story frame school house was erected on the upper table of the village plat, in which two, and a portion of the year, three departments are maintained.” The account adds that an independent school district had recently been organized (it is understood that would be Clearwater’s Independent School District No. 884) “and the schools are making commendable progress. Two other schools are maintained in the town outside the village, one located on section seven, and the other on section twenty-two.”²

The typical nature of early Wright County and other pioneer schools was described in *Condensed History of Wright County*: “These schools were. . . heated in most instances by huge box stoves, with possibly a large iron drum to conserve the heat from the escaping flame and smoke. These pioneer school rooms did not require any modern system of ventilation, and it was usually close to the noon hour before the temperature reached a point where all parts of the room were sufficiently warm to give comfort to the pupils. Due to this fact, there were long benches placed about the stove where the pupils seated themselves during the early hours of the morning. The furniture was made by some local carpenter from lumber secured from the crude sawmills of the period. The teacher was expected to serve as janitor, but in some cases, hired some boy living near the schoolhouse to build the fires. If the teacher found favor with the older girls, they rendered voluntary assistance in cleaning the floors and desks and in some instances, the windows.

“This type of schools existed as late as the early eighties, when frame buildings were constructed, and in many of the more flourishing villages, well graded schools were established and modern school furniture was installed. In some instances there were schools of two, three and four departments.”⁴

The Clearwater building was remodeled in 1906, in preparation for organizing high school classes. The cornerstone for the new building contained copies of the following: Petition and Resolution; Board of Education; Faculty; District Residents; Old Home Week Invitations; Bank Statements; Clearwater Herald; Old Glory.³

Records show that, in 1915, the school district purchased the two lots adjoining the school ground for the amount of \$105. The addition housing the lavatories was added in 1916.

“The hot lunch cafeteria was a most welcome installation in 1959. . .” asserts the “History Highlites brochure.”³

Scope of learning expands through the years

Previous to 1908 there was a two-year high school, according to the 1969 “History Highlites” brochure. In 1908, the first graduating class included Catherine Stevens Lyons, Myrtle Trafton, and Elsie Laughton Backstead. The two teachers were Miss Myrtle Bacon and Mr. Hamilton, who taught chemistry, English and solid geometry.³ Before her marriage to Hamline Lyons, 1908 Clearwater graduate Catherine Stevens taught for several years in the primary grades in Clearwater. She was a granddaughter of Simon Stevens, one of the pioneers who first settled in the community. A copy of an unidentified newspaper item, with photo, shows her at the Clearwater school about the time of the dispersal sale of property.

Mr. Howard Stewart, principal 1911-1912, taught math and science. Mr. Clyde Anderson was principal 1912-14.⁴

The year 1932 saw the last high school graduating class. Eleven grades continued to be maintained through 1939, while the seniors went to Clear Lake, Annandale and St. Cloud. High school was then discontinued in the spring of 1940.³

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.³

In 1957 the Clearwater District No. 17 became District No. 884. In 1965, the Fish Creek and Sherman Districts were annexed and a second school bus purchased. On April 6, 1968, Clearwater School District No. 884 consolidated with the St. Cloud Public School District No. 742. Clearwater Public School maintained grades 1–6 until the end of the 1968-69 school term. Students then began attending the new Clearview School midway between Clear Lake and Clearwater.³

1871 building changes hands over the years

Before closing the school and selling it at auction, a public tour was scheduled in June or July of 1969. Independent School District 742 (St. Cloud) sold the building site (lots 2 through 9, block 29), the two-story frame building and a one-stall block garage at public auction July 19, 1969. Also on the auction block were the following items: school lunch tables and benches, a Schiller upright piano, a Hamilton upright piano, teachers’ desks, arm chairs, hardwood chairs, bookcases, pictures, a milk dispenser, a three-compartment sink, a General Electric oven, miscellaneous kitchen equipment, primary student desks, intermediate student desks and other miscellaneous items. (6) Former mayor Curtis Heaton reports that Vernon Lumley purchased the school bell, which is on display in front of the Clearwater City Hall today (2013).

The building was purchased by Joseph and Gloria Laughlin, a roofing contractor, and Herman and Marion Held, owner of Gopher Lumber and Wrecking.

Wally Houle reported that Laughlin and Held completely gutted the building and remodeled it into an 11-unit apartment building. He said this remodeling was done with used lumber and aluminum windows from trailer houses, that did not match, from Held's business. The 11- or 12-foot ceilings were dropped, and eight-foot false ceilings inserted, but the walls were not boxed out, so that smells and noise traveled from one apartment to another. Also, the old coal/wood furnace was converted to electric heat.

Leonard and Delores Kiffmeyer purchased the building in January 1984, for the price of \$1 plus payment of back taxes since January 1974, according to records at the Wright County Recorder's office.

Wallace and Dorothy Houle purchased, remodeled and updated the apartment building, former schoolhouse, later in 1984. Wally said that, at that time, he found the letters "CRHANSEN" scratched into the back stairwell. (Chris Hansen was a graduate of Clearwater High School and a 36-year school board clerk.)

County records show that Kenneth Catton, a dentist in St. Cloud, and Helen Catton purchased the building in 1987. After Kenneth Catton's death in 1995, Clifford and Linda Helgeson of Clear Lake purchased the property and sold it to Thomas and Beverly Allen in 2001. At this writing, in 2013, the Allen's continue to be the owners.

Teachers, students, personnel remembered

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.⁷

Miss A. Mahew, a Clearwater teacher, attended the first teachers' institute on record, in Monticello, in Dec. 28, 1864.³ 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 \$25.³

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."⁸

By 1937-38 Wright County had 140 schoolhouses in 138 districts. The secondary and graded elementary schools enrolled 2,731 pupils in the 1938-39 school year, taught by 128 teachers; and ungraded elementary schools served 2,375 pupils, taught by 129 teachers. Also that year, Clearwater was one of ten communities in Wright County offering high school courses.¹

Jay C. Miller was a long-time janitor at the Clearwater school between the 1930s and 1950s. Jim Hansen was a janitor some time after Miller.⁷

For 15 years, between 1954 and 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, while he was also 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.⁷

Footnotes:

1. *Wright County Historical Sketch*, Material taken from the "Inventory of the County Archives of Minnesota" Vol. No. 86, Wright County, Minnesota, Sept. 1940.
2. *History of Wright County, MN*, reprinted from the *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* by Prof. N.H. Winchell, Rev. Edward D. Neill and Charles S. Bryant (Minnesota Historical Company (1881)
3. Clearwater Public School "*History Highlites*" 1871-1969 brochure, June 8, 1969. Published for a tour of the 1871 building, in conjunction with its closing and sale.
4. *Condensed History of Wright County - 1851-1935*. Compiled and published by C.A. French, Monticello, Minnesota and Frank B. Lamson, Peru, Indiana. 1935. Eagle Printing Company, Delano, Minnesota.
5. Document: "Early History of Clearwater" presented by Jennette/Jeanette Sanborn Whitemore at the 1955 centennial picnic
6. Auction bill published in the *St. Cloud Times*, July 11 and 16, 1969
7. Document: recorded by Winnie Frank, typed by Elaine Paumen in July 2001
8. "Class of 1911" copy of a newspaper story, paper and date unidentified.

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