

Centennial Reflections

Essays from the Oakwood Historical Society

Oakwood Schools from 1846 to Today

By Harry G. Ebeling

How can we reflect about Oakwood without discussing the schools?

We can't – because they are an integral part of our community. They are the one thing everyone brags about. We have our critics within and outside of the city, and there are areas about the schools that people have and always will criticize, but when talking about our home, we all fall back on the schools. In 1929, when Dayton was suggesting that we should be annexed, the rallying point was maintaining the separate school system.

And we all know the reason why we support them. It's because they turn out a superior product. The consistent results of every testing measure and the performance of graduates in college, as well as any measure you can cite, say to Oakwood – “Good Job – Keep it Up.” Of course there are missteps, disputes about curriculum, and graduates who don't meet some vague notion of success, but we turn out over a hundred good kids a year.

Back in 1846, the Trustees of Van Buren Township established a new school district and appointed J. Stewart Wead, Jacob Shroyer and Jefferson Patterson as directors. Mr. Patterson leased a small, triangular piece of ground at the intersection of what is now Far Hills Avenue and Oakwood Avenue for a dollar a year, and built a schoolhouse for \$253. Thirty students began classes under Henry Reddout, who was paid \$20 a month. Each student paid 33 cents tuition and the school prospered for 40 years with many pioneer Oakwood families' support.

The wonderful memories are documented in a pamphlet by Charlotte Reeve Conover, Dayton historian, in 1906, when John H. Patterson sponsored a reunion. It is filled with memories of how they filled their days and how Patterson escorted them on a tour, followed by lunch, of his Far Hills estate. Space doesn't permit more about this event – it's a wonderful story.

The township built a later school on West Schantz Avenue at about the entrance to what became Sugar Camp. This school lasted until Oakwood became a village and bought the property at Harman Avenue and West Dixon Avenue in 1909.

Known as “The Barn,” this building made do until the first school bond construction issue was passed in 1912 for \$15,000. This wasn't enough, requiring solicitation of private funds, a third of which is said to have come from John H. Patterson. The first

building contained only three classrooms and a small office. In 1915, increased needs required two more bond issues. By 1917, there were 200 pupils taught by six teachers. In 1920, there were 197 pupils from K through 8 grades, taught by 10 instructors, and we were on our way to the period of greatest growth in Oakwood's history. Between 1921 and 1931 the school population increased from 197 to 1,288, attracting tuition students from the area, despite competition from nearby Moraine Park School.

By 1922, Oakwood was clearly on its way, so a \$450,000 bond issue was presented to the voters for building a new six-year high school. The board purchased the C. C. Harman farm of 15.5 acres on Far Hills Avenue. We graduated our first high school class of eight students in 1924 from the new facility. Gone were the days of sending students to Dayton schools or to private schools above grade 8. The virtues of the building are extolled in an article in the Dayton Journal in April 1925.

In 1926, the board purchased the half city block between Telford and Aberdeen Avenues, facing Shafor Boulevard, for a new grade school to meet expanding needs in the newly annexed part of the city to the south. Shafor Boulevard School was opened in the fall of 1926 in five portable cottages for 110 students. By the time it was complete in 1929 there were 303 students. In 1940, it was renamed Edwin D. Smith School in honor of long time board member who had served 14 years.

The addition of the Junior High School on the Schantz Avenue side in 1930 completed the high school campus and we began the six year plan of 7th through 12th grades there, adding a gymnasium and library.

Fast forward through the years, when the stadium was built in 1936, and additions and remodeling were completed, to 1999, when we were bursting at the seams. School enrollment was over 2,000 and facilities were not able to meet the needs of modern times. Lightning struck with the gift of one million dollars from the estates of deceased 47 year residents Marge and Julian Lange. This gift enabled the board to purchase the former South Dayton Prep building on Dorothy Lane. With school board funds, voluntary contributions and a lot of sweat by citizens, Oakwood was able to open our only new school in 70 years.

Kindergarten, pre-school for disabled, and latch key programs are offered at this 13,700 square foot building. Leased buses from Kettering provide transportation. We are running a 2300 student school system without any tuition students, which is an award winning system, achieving distinctions from all grading authorities, and maintaining the high standards for which we are known and of which we are justly proud.

Bricks and mortar are not the whole story. Oakwood schools would not be where they are today without the visionary guidance of Arthur E. Claggett who was hired in 1922 as principal and superintendent. The board, under the leadership of Nelson S. Talbott, adopted the six year plan, in which grade school ends with the sixth year and 7th through 12th years are high school.

By 1930, the teaching staff was required to have a college degree and one year of graduate school. An equal number of men and women high school teachers were maintained to ensure that boys had men advisors and girls had women advisors. The curriculum had a broad spectrum on life enrichment studies with space designated for them.

Claggett's philosophy is expressed in many writings of the era, but are summarized in a booklet published by the board in 1927 concerning the six year plan. He retired in 1945 after 23 years of service. A Vision Statement published in 1924 contained the following:

"School Leaders must continually study the needs of their communities and the needs of present day life and must adjust the school curriculum to meet these needs."



Oakwood High School campus circa mid 1930's.