

History: Student enrollment goes from 30 to 4,000

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February 24 was "Back to School" night for Historical Society members who heard Thelma Bernhardt and Dorothy Lockett recall their school teaching experiences of twenty and thirty years ago on the South Shore and were hosted to a tour of the new modern Sierra House School facilities by Principal Stan Rose. A highlight of the tour was the historic Sierra House Wall constructed of wide planking obtained from outbuildings remaining from the original Sierra House waystation which was located directly across Pioneer Trail from the present school. Bob Doudell of the School District was introduced and applauded for his efforts in designing and constructing the attractive memorial wall.



Thelma Bernhardt, a Berkeley graduate and resident of Lake Tahoe since 1947, was a substitute until starting as full-time 2nd grade teacher in 1952. Later she retired to take care of her family, but returned to teaching when Bijou School opened in 1961. She taught fourth grade at Bijou until her retirement last year. She recalled the first school building at the "Y" (later moved to the area generally behind the American Legion Hall and presently used as the Carpenters' Union Hall). School started immediately after Labor Day with an enrollment of about 30, which gradually decreased to about 12 as residents left in October or November, or as soon as the snow fell, not to return until the April or May spring weather. Sometimes there were not enough students to put on the Christmas program.

School at one time was held in the American Legion Hall, which was divided into four little rooms. Later the "fireside" room became the kindergarten room. Outside concrete basketball courts were built to inaugurate a sports program – but the students had to clean off the snow before they could be used.

There was no library in the early days. It was very much of a highlight when the bookmobile came from Placerville. Great care went into choosing the book or books you could keep until the bookmobile came back again in two weeks – that is, if it could get back over the Summit in two weeks. The upstairs loft of Pat Amundson's house at 961 Cave Rock once held the library. Then it was moved to Bob Wakeman's on Highway 89, before the Friends of the Library finally were able to build the present library. The "new" school (now the Intermediate School) had a wall in one room devoted to books once it was built.

Everyone brought his lunch as there was no cafeteria. Once the PTA became active, that group provided a hot lunch once a week. On one occasion the PTA members barricaded the highway to call attention to the necessity for a safer crossing for the children at the Lyons Avenue corner.

The one school bus was a carryall driven by one of the teachers who once had the dubious thrill of having a wheel come off the loaded bus while she was traversing the old Meyers Grade, but proved equal to the occasion. The bus also was fitted with special blackboards which could be attached to the seatbacks so it might serve as an auxiliary classroom for the reading groups. The superintendent would warm it up for 30 minutes, then out would come the students bundled up in their winter wear for their reading class.

Heat was provided in the schoolrooms by big oil space heaters. On one occasion, someone smelled fire, the Fire Department was called and it appeared that the smell was coming from the ceiling. The children were all evacuated while the firemen

searched out the cause – a wad of bubble gum shot into one of the ceiling vents.

Carolyn Reed, a traveling music teacher, taught voice and some instrumental music. Catherine McBride, school nurse for many years until her recent retirement, was nurse and medical advisor to everyone in the community – even gave allergy shots.

For many years classes were offered only through the 8th grade with some secondary students going to the Douglas County High School, later to Placerville.

Dorothy Lockett, another Berkeley graduate, arrived here on July 4, 1948, with new credential, fresh ideas, and no place to stay. In looking for a room, she met Mrs. Stella Johnson who welcomed her as a guest in the Johnson home. On hearing there were enough children in town to start a kindergarten, she telephoned the Superintendent, Glenn Smith, and “never got a job so fast in all my life.” Besides the kindergarten, Mrs. Lockett was engaged to teach art to all classes and kept the trunk of her car liberally stocked with powdered poster paint, brushes, crayons, etc. Having become stuck in the snow on one occasion, she poured four cans of red powdered paint out by the tires in an attempt to gain traction. Apparently this did not work, but a Globin’s Laundry truck driver coming along a bit later was horrified at the carnage caused by the terrible accident.

The kindergarten tots, besides having the advantage of the stone fireplace, also cooked in the kitchen and kept tabs on the resident cat, Mother 6-Toes whom they had rescued from under the building. Mrs. 6-Toes later had six kittens who were regally outfitted and wheeled about in the doll buggies. The fish at the Trout Farm across the street were fed every morning by the children.

She agreed with Mrs. Bernhardt that 1954 was the year the

enrollment – and the population – began to grow. Classes were on triple sessions and railroad lanterns were used by the superintendent and teacher to take the children out to cross the highway after the last session of the day. A Stanford University Committee did a survey predicting a 10-year enrolment pattern, which was exceeded in two years.

She recalled Judge Lawson visiting her classroom once a week to “sit back and restore myself.” Father Lyon, dearly loved by the children, was a daily visitor. Once a year Mrs. Rabe, dressed in an alpaca skirt and lovely white blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves, came to inspect the school to see if it was keeping up to standards. Mrs. Rabe, a former school teacher, was conducted on tour by Mr. Smith with great ceremony.

There was little road equipment in those days – one rotary snow plow and one push plow. It was possible to drive in the dark from Meyers to Stateline and not see a single light of any kind. When she moved to a residence on Lodi Avenue, she got lost going home every evening, as there was no landmark to tell where to turn. The present “planning days” for teachers were then known as “Teachers’ Institute.” In 1953-54, Mr. Smith invited all the teachers of the County district to come to Tahoe for Institute and raised quite an uproar – “Who would want to go up to that wilderness?” In 1948 when she first arrived, there were perhaps 700 people in the entire Basin with less than 200 student enrollment. The January 1976 enrollment in the Lake Tahoe Unified District was over 4000.

Mrs. Lockett, who retired in 1972, gave tribute to the foresight of Superintendent Glenn Smith who arranged for the acquisition of sites for the present school facilities when property could be obtained at a reasonable cost, and whose foresight in long range planning has served to make the Lake Tahoe Unified School District one of the foremost districts in the United States.