

Early Schools About County

By Ernest D. Wichels

Monday, February 17, 1964

Alfred W. Newman, a member of the governing body of Vallejo's Unified School District, presented a remarkable story of the public schools in this community at the November, 1963, meeting of the Solano County Historical Society.

With the assistance of many individuals—including Superintendent Paul Crabb, the Vallejo Librarians and others, Al Newman prepared an historical document which we commend to anyone interested in the origin and growth of Vallejo's schools. We hope it will soon be put in published form. A few of the interesting dates and facts are presented here.

There was no public school in Vallejo prior to 1855. In that year, with the backing of Admiral Farragut and Naval Constructor Isaiah Hanscom a public subscription of \$1,000 resulted in the building of a combined church and school. General Frisbie donated the lots, located where Staats and Bell Furniture Store operates on Virginia Street. The church was the Methodist; the first teacher a Miss Frost.

This joint arrangement didn't last very long, and the school moved to several other locations during the next two years.

FIRST SCHOOL HOUSE

In 1957, at a public meeting (held in the old Capitol Building) it was voted to build a school house by voluntary subscriptions. General Frisbie again donated the property—the site where the Lincoln School and playground (Carolina Street between Sonoma and Sutter) are now situated. This was a four room building. There were many energetic citizens supporting the schools in those early days, but we single out G. W. Simonton as perhaps the principal guiding force for the first 20 years.

While these early schools—with their trustees, property holdings, etc.—are considered “public schools,” we should note that the so-called “public” funds were in their entirety raised by voluntary subscriptions, and it was not until 1867 that a tax levy of 35 cents per hundred in this township was instituted for the support of the Vallejo schools.

The first school bond issue was voted upon, and carried, in 1869, and a three-story school building erected on the Carolina Street property for \$14,000. This school was occupied in 1870.

LOW BUDGETS, SALARIES

Our readers may be interested (in view of the 1964 multi-million dollar budget of our very excellent Vallejo school system) to know what the school trustees spent in the 1871-1872 school year. They paid \$13,745.45 in salaries; interest on money borrowed to pay teachers, \$510.40; repairs, \$1,030.29; school furniture, \$354.25; library \$50; water \$114.80; and, with other incidentals, a total budget of \$18,433.16. The salary schedule for this particular school year will amaze our present faculty members: \$67.32 average monthly salary for male teachers; \$48.90 average monthly pay for female teachers. The average daily attendance in 1871-1872 was 585 students.

Prior to the 1855 "public" school venture, and for at least 20 years later, Vallejo children had access to private schools. The first was taught by a Mrs. Drake in 1852. Other private schools included: Mrs. Mary L. Currier, 217 Sacramento St.; Mrs. Kennedy, Marin and Virginia; Mr. Mullins, Virginia and Sonoma; Miss Nevada Olinger, 156 Marin St.; Miss Annie Frisbie, 160 Georgia St.; Miss Maguire, Santa Clara and Capitol; and Miss Carrie Christenson, 154 Georgia. One of the largest was Tripp's Institute of Penmanship, operated by Professor W. H. Tripp, at 158 Georgia Street.

FIRST HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Vallejo's first high school class graduated in 1873—four young ladies, whose names represent families still prominent in today's community life. They were Hettie Dempsey, Margaret Tobin, Mary McKnight and Mary Long. We also note that the first issue of the High School paper, the Red and White, was printed in 1902.

Among the highlights is the fact that Vallejo—in all of California—was the first to desegregate public schools. Until the middle of 1874, a school for colored children was maintained in rooms rented in the United States Hotel, 24 Maine Street. In a meeting of the school board held July 3, 1874, a resolution was introduced to abolish the colored school and admit the pupils to the graded schools. The meeting was attended by a considerable number of citizens, and the minutes indicate that of all those present, only one dissenting voice was heard. The resolution was adopted—that was 90 years ago!

The entire 110-year history is exciting; we hope some day it may be made available to anyone who wishes to read it.

MILLS COLLEGE

Benicia was at one time an educational center in Northern California. They boasted (in the 1850's) three public schools, St. Dominic's Missionary College, St. Catherine's Convent, St. Augustine's Training School for Boys, and the forerunner of present

world-renowned Mills College of Oakland. Early in 1869 the Vallejo Chronicle said: "The Benicia Seminary, under the management of Mr. and Mrs. C. T. Mills, is in a most flourishing condition. There is in attendance at the present session 127 boarding pupils and 50 day scholars. A large number of teachers and professors are employed and the Seminary bears the reputation of being a first-class institution. Young ladies from all parts of the state received here a finished education. The seminaries of learning at Benicia keep up the town, there being three of them, all being in a prosperous condition."

Vacaville, too, in those days had an institution of higher learning—the Vacaville College, operated by the Methodist Episcopal Church, with students from all parts of California; the college grounds were most impressive, according to the Vallejo Recorder of July 27.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/727>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/727/>