

**A HISTORY OF THE  
PORT NECHES INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**Early Days to 1975**

*The following brief history of Port Neches schools relied on the works of three authors: Erleen Allred, W.T. Block, and Buck Ford. This sketchy historical overview of education in the Port Neches community from the earliest known days is a merger of information found in the three authors' printed manuscripts. Others sources were also utilized.*

*Mrs. Erleen Allred did an extensive amount of research and completed a document in 1976 relying greatly on interviews of long-time Port Neches resident and former school district employee Mr. E.S. Bellair. Mr. Bellair, 75 when interviewed, spent countless hours taxing his memory and talking with other residents who lived during the early school years. Among those he talked with were Roy East, Masil Smith, W.T. Block, Aaron Keith, Harry Beaumont, Oscar, Claudia, and Seawillow Whittington, Frank Crawford, Mrs. H.H. (Edna) Hodges, Mrs. Era Block Henderson, and William DeBlanc.*

*Mrs. Lena Hawthorne, long-time high school history teacher, also supplied a few facts on the early history.*

*Mr. Bellair relied on The School Review of Jefferson County, Texas, 1921, to supply most of the information for 1921. That review was published with the assistance of Miss Mildred Parks, of the China school, and Mr. J.H. Hicks, Superintendent of the Port Neches school.*

*Mr. Bellair also used the little history book of the First United Methodist Church of Port Neches written by Mr. and Mrs. W.E. Parsons for some of his input.*

*Records from the 1920s were found at the Port Neches ISD administration office. Dr. Oliver Monk, Superintendent, his secretary, Mrs. Ruth Smith, and Mr. Dalton Fox, former principal of Woodcrest Elementary School, were most helpful in supplying historical information of the last 50 years or so.*

*W.T. Block's book, Sapphire City Of The Neches, was the source of much historical data reported in this document. Mr. Block is a highly respected historian who has written extensively on local historical events and has personal knowledge of the much of the school's development.*

*Buck Ford's book, Down Trails of Victory, a thorough account of Port Neches football successes, rendered some insights on how and when many of the traditions observed today at Port Neches-Groves High School originated.*

Charlie L. Reynolds  
PN-G Class of 1957  
Retired Ridgewood Elementary Principal

April 2003

The Port Neches-Groves Independent School District is located in the southeastern part of Jefferson County on the west bank of the Neches River midway between Beaumont and Port Arthur, Texas, and serves both Port Neches and Groves' residents. Much of this area is in a Mexican Land Grant of 4,428 acres that was acquired by Thomas F. McKinney in April 1831, the first land grant in Jefferson County. Joseph Grigsby received a land grant on November 6, 1834, that included much of the city of Groves.

According to a conveyance dated October 7, 1837, and filed April 9, 1838, in Volume A, page 39 of the Deed of Records of Jefferson County, Thomas F. McKinney sold the eastern two-thirds of his land holdings to Joseph Grigsby for the sum of \$6,172.00. The small community then became known as Grigsby's Bluff although Grigsby referred to the settlement as McKinneytown. An 1840 map of Jefferson County identified it as McKinney's Bluff.

A small settlement grew near Grigsby's plantation. He was the first industrialist in Jefferson County and operated the county's first horse-driven sawmill, the first horse-driven cotton gin and the county's first blacksmith shop. A few other families moved into the river community opening up other businesses.

Grigsby died in 1841 and was buried next to his daughter in Grigsby Cemetery across from the present-day Texaco office building. Grigsby's plantation was ultimately sold to meet financial obligations after the wife moved the family to Jasper. The collection of small businesses closed and only a few struggling families resided there.

The settlement at Grigsby's Bluff began to grow again in 1856 when John T. Johnson and Samuel Remley bought land along the river where they built a steam sawmill. A post office (later closed during the Civil War) and store were established there in 1859, as Grigsby's Bluff became a regular mail stop for Neches River steamboats. A few large antebellum homes were built just east of the present park. The Moseley and Remley homes faced the water with Remley's residence very near river's edge.

It was not unusual for educated adults to move into Texas areas where there were no schools and raise children who could not read or write until some form of private or public education was offered. In time enough people began moving into the Grigsby's Bluff area to give some thought toward public education although no record of a true public school was found until after 1880.

The July 1860 Jefferson County census record did show ten children in Grigsby's Bluff area were receiving education. W.T. Block surmises they were perhaps boarded in Beaumont or Sabine Pass so they could attend school. In time, education was considered such a vital need for early youngsters that space in private homes began serving as schoolhouses well before the area became known as Port Neches.

Perhaps the first school was established by Mrs. Mary Wardell when she opened Wardell's Female School in November 1860 with sixteen female students. She promised "constant vigilance in imparting a sound education, and endeavor to maintain the health, happiness, and unspotted reputation of those committed to her charge." Mrs. Wardell possibly operated the school for about six-months in the vacant W.N. Moseley plantation house located near the end of present-day Dearing Street.

Chuck Minshew, Groves Middle School history teacher, related that in 1862 Confederate troops hastily constructed Fort Grigsby to block a possible Union thrust up

the Neches River. Fort Grigsby was constructed on the site of the old Grigsby plantation. That was necessary, Minshew said, to stop Union naval movement up the Neches to Beaumont following the abandonment of Sabine Pass upon the outbreak of yellow fever. Defenses were returned to Sabine Pass as soon as the epidemic passed. The fort was abandoned in January 1863.

In 1871, the Oliver W. Keith home was erected on 500 acres near the northeast corner of the Thomas F. McKinney grant of land, east of present-day Texaco in the Little Abbeville area near landfall into the Neches River. That structure was just off East Port Neches Avenue, later referred to by some as "Sarah Jane Road." According to Aaron Keith, who was born in that house, there was a room attached to the rear of the main house called the dining room. Mr. Keith's mother, Margaret Keith, taught her two children and some of the neighbor's children in the dining room. Mrs. Keith's sister, Mrs. Moore, might have taught there also.

Mr. Keith also remembered attending another small school that he called "the little school house in the prairie." It was a public school although there is no written record of it. Seawillow Whittington and Mr. Walter Beaumont, resident of what is today Groves, were two of the students who attended that particular school. That small one-room building was located on the O.W. Keith property on the prairie about a half-mile from the Keith home. The building was eventually moved away. The teacher was a young man by the name of Lew Cruse, about nineteen years old.

Frank Crawford, who was a young boy during the time of that little school, told of carrying a shotgun to school with him. He said when he crossed the prairie, wild bulls chased him and he saw wolves and coyotes every day. Only two grades, or rather the completion of two primers, was the extent of many a child's education in the common school era. It was pretty much left up to the parent when a child started attending one of those schools, some were as old as nine or ten when they started learning to read and write.

Another recollection of yet another small private school about 1882 came from Mr. W.T. Block. He wrote of his father attending a school of that type located near the Block property at the intersection of Lee and Marion Streets where the semester was held during the long winter months. Katie Remley was the teacher. Mrs. Era Block Henderson also recalled her father, Albert Block, attending that school across the bayou from where the Block Cemetery, now known as Oak Bluff Cemetery, was located in the northwest corner of Port Neches. A walkway was built over the bayou so the children could reach the little school. The Merrimans, early settlers of this area, also attended that one-room school that apparently did not last very long.

Since there were no desks in that school, a board was nailed around the wall for pupils to sit upon. The crude blackboard was made of two boards nailed together and painted black. Someone gave the school an old wood heater to keep some 15 pupils warm during cold weather. The requirement for teaching was a third grade certificate, which could be obtained at the completion of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The salary was \$30.00 a month, and room and board was \$10.00 a month. Trustees of this school were A.C. Block, George Keith, and Bill Gentz.

There were no grades or report cards. When a student could master the first grader, he went to the second. McGuffy's Reader, The Blue Back Speller, Ray's Arithmetic, and McGuffy's Geography and History were the textbooks used. Pupils learned to write by

copying the examples the teacher put on the blackboard. Each pupil had his own slate to write on.

School lasted from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. One hour was allotted for dinner, and the children were allowed to go home to eat. Duties around the farm dictated when and how long students attended school.

Several methods of punishment were used. The most common was sitting on a stool in the corner of the room while wearing a dunce cap. It was not unusual to keep a pupil after school because he could not recite his lessons. The "rod" was used very often.

The school at Lee and Marion Street probably lasted until about 1886, perhaps until the opening of the Sycamore Street School.

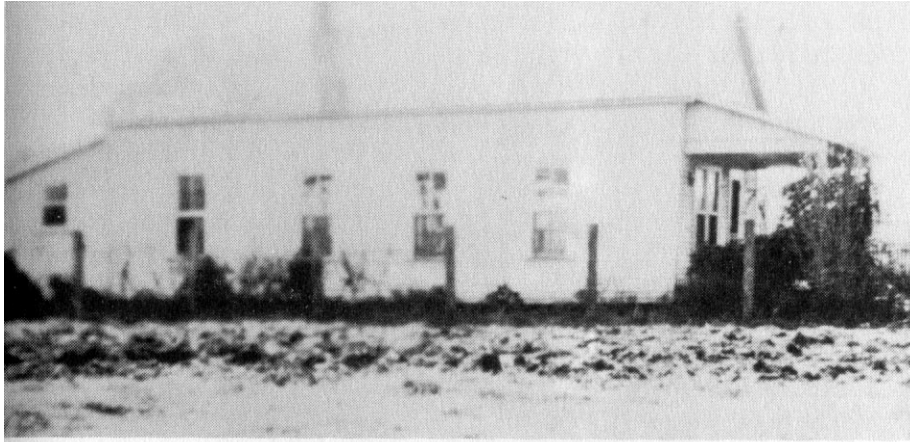
On September 6, 1881, Methodism came to Grigsby's Bluff. That had a profound effect on the school system of the little community. On that day, Rev. W.H. Crawford organized the first local Methodist church at the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Gentz. Settlers at that time included the families of Jack Beaumont, C.A. Smith, Samuel Remley, W.T. Block, R.W. Thompson, Marion E. Merriman, John Kline, Samuel Lee, W.M. Nelson, Oliver and George Keith, to name a few. The first congregation had only sixteen members, and the earliest services were conducted in the homes of the following families: Margaret Keith, A. Smith, J. Beaumont, W. Gentz, S. Remley, Samuel Lee, W.M. Nelson, M.E. Merriman and D.W. Sampson.

About 1885, George Rexas sold the old Amos Tenner home, located today on the lot at 502 East Port Neches Avenue at Sycamore Street, to W.P.H. McFaddin of Beaumont, who soon mounted it on rollers and wagons when he attempted to move it. When his equipment broke down, he offered to sell the house for \$100. Mrs. Margaret Ann Keith, a nearby resident, purchased the house, repaired it, and offered it to the community for use as a school and church. Due to this gift, Port Neches had a school and a church for the next nine years called the Sycamore Street School. (Block suggested that this school might have been "the little school on the prairie" described earlier.)

Kate Remley moved from the school at Lee and Marion Street and became the teacher at the Sycamore School for a while. Coal oil lamps were used to light the building. An organ was used as an accompaniment to the songs and music.

By 1892, the little building became crowded. To solve the problem, some of the students were moved to the one-story grocery store owned by Trussell and Gregg in what is known today as Old Town. Mr. Roy East was sixteen years old at the time and recalled driving a one-horse wagon to deliver ten students from the Abbeville side to this school. Mrs. D. Henderson was the teacher.

In 1894, the church/school building needed repairs. As the town seemed to be developing to the west, it was decided to look for a location in that section rather than repair the old building. Mr. Bud Smith donated an acre of ground at the corner of Port Neches Avenue and Nall to be used for both religious and educational purposes. The vacant First National Bank now stands on that site. Following construction of a school, the building became a community church as well and was used by Methodist and Baptist congregations. The Baptist membership completed their first sanctuary in 1917.



Community Church-School, 1894–1911, Nall and Port Neches Avenue,

Smith stipulated the property would revert to him when it was no longer used as a school, which is what happened when the C.O. Baird School was built in 1911. At that time the property was sold to the Baxter family in Orange. Dr. J.H. Haizlip of Nederland bought and sold the land to the Methodists for \$150. (In coming years that same piece of property would be given to the school district once more.)

Mr. William DeBlanc started to the newer school in 1909 when he was nine years old. He remembered that at Christmas time they had a Christmas tree and presented a program for the entire community. Students lived all over Port Neches and even into the edge of Groves. One of the teachers was Mrs. Brent. Mr. DeBlanc recalls her as having one blue eye and one brown eye. Another teacher was Mrs. Margaret Herrington who later married Judge Trussell.

Though information is quite sketchy about early education in the community, W.T. Block states, "One fact remains certain. Between the years 1902 and 1910, there were two schools in Port Neches during most of the years, and perhaps three during some of them."

Industrialization arrived in Grigsby's Bluff as a direct result of the Lucas well at Spindletop gushing a stream of crude oil 100 feet into the air on January 10, 1901, ushering in a large oil boom. Within six months the Central Asphalt and Refining Company was announced to be located on the Neches River at Grigsby's Bluff.

One of Block's newspaper articles indicated that beginning in 1905, the business district of Port Neches (now referred to as "Old Town") was confined to the 100-200 blocks of Avenue A, now Grigsby St. There were then two merchants, D. A. Bibb Grocery and Insurance Agency and Gregg, Trussell and Co. The center of industrial life was the new Texas Co. asphalt and roofing plant, located a few blocks to the east. Records reveal that the Texas Company purchased the Central Asphalt and Refining Co. in 1906.

While Central Asphalt owned the facility, the name of that location was supposedly changed in 1902 to Port Neches to provide a more dignified address for a new post office. The name was quickly applied to the entire Grigsby's Bluff settlement.

As the town began to grow, a need was realized for a better school facility. In 1911, C.O. Baird of Pennsylvania donated two acres of land for a school building. This is

recorded in the Deed of Records of Jefferson County, Volume #120, Page 534. His generosity ended an era of primitive one-room schoolhouses.

A new brick building was constructed at a cost of \$16,700 exclusive of furnishings. Residents of Port Neches bragged that they “have at least as good a school house as Nederland.” The new eight-room modern brick structure was named the C.O. Baird School, after its benefactor who bought a large plot of Grigsby Bluff in 1898, (much of which later became the site of the synthetic rubber complex). The building later became known as Building I. The Baird building had three floors. Eight classrooms occupied the second two floors. The ground floor was more or less a basement that served in later years as an athletic field house.

Mr. DeBlanc recalled that on the first day of school in the new building there was a big celebration and everyone from miles around came. The girls wore their best dresses with pretty ribbons in their hair. The boys wore their pants that bloused at the knee or came nearly to the knee with several buttons just above the knee. The boys also wore shoes and long ribbed black stockings. It was a hot day, and when it was over, all the boys made for the river, took off those hot stocking and tight new shoes and cooled their feet in river water.

A large cast iron bell was hung on the north side of the building. It could be heard for miles and was used to call many a reluctant boy and girl to school. The bell was 15 inches in diameter and had a clear, sweet tone.

Mr. Aaron Keith recalled that as a small boy he drove a team of two horses pulling what was called a surrey and hauled the children who lived in that vicinity to the “big new brick school.” The Gentz children lived farther out in the prairie to the east. The Whittington children lived about a mile farther east. They all had to cross a bayou and drive through the woods to get to the new school.

At the end of the spring semester of 1912, students presented the one-act play Turn of the Tide. Proceeds went to buy new books for the school library.

In September 1911, the County School Board printed the following declaration: “District 16, High School, Second Class, Grades 1-10 inclusive at Port Neches.” In June 1915, the county board added one grade and one teacher to the Port Neches School, making it a high school of the First Class with 11 grades. Enrollment for that year was 180 students.

Many students carried their lunches to school in half-gallon syrup pails or lard buckets. Mr. E.S. Bellair recalled that instead of the sandwiches of today, homemade biscuits, baked sweet potatoes, rice, beans, and fruit comprised many a lunch. Some carried syrup in glass bottles such as chili powder bottles. Many children went home for lunch.

A school cafeteria was established in the basement of Building I. Mrs. H.H. (Edna) Hodges was the first cafeteria manager during the period from 1917 to 1918. Cookies and bread were acquired from Yentzen’s Bakery in Nederland. Rodgers’ Dairy, located at the present Huntsman site, provided the milk. Soups, stews, rice, red beans and sandwiches were served. Water for the cafeteria was brought in from another part of the building.

As the community around the school grew, so logically did the school. By 1918, several business houses had located in "Old Town," Z. Goolsbee and Co., George Thomas Pharmacy, Liberty Theater, Franks Hotel, J. Levy Dry Goods, and Oaks Hotel.

The First National Bank opened there in 1920. D. A. Bibb was postmaster in a small wooden building on the northwest corner of Ave. A and Dearing St. By 1922 the old theater housed the newly organized St. Elizabeth Catholic Church. The seldom used city jail, still found on Grigsby Street, was constructed during the WW I era for \$2,218.

The town was caught up in the war effort. During World War I, Port Neches students joined the Junior Red Cross and participated in making surgical dressings and knitted garments. Miss Mary Seale, third grade teacher, taught knitting to the children in her class before and after school. A small group of Boy Scouts collected 2,000 magazines for American servicemen. School enrollment grew rapidly during the war because new families moved into the area to work at the asphalt plant.

In 1919, a wooden structure was erected and called the homemaking cottage. It contained five rooms, large closets and dining room. By 1929 it was equipped with sewing machines, cutting tables, gas and oil burning cook stoves, and a home nursing room.

Port Neches' population grew as more people moved to the area to work in the Texas Company asphalt plant. In 1920, \$55,000.00 in bonds were issued to add another brick facility. This addition was known as Building II and was located behind Building I on Main Street in Port Neches.

A large tower with a cistern on top supplied the two buildings with water. Water was first piped free of charge from the Texas Company refinery, one of the world's largest asphalt plants located 600 yards east of the school campus. That tower was used until 1930 when the city built its own water plant.

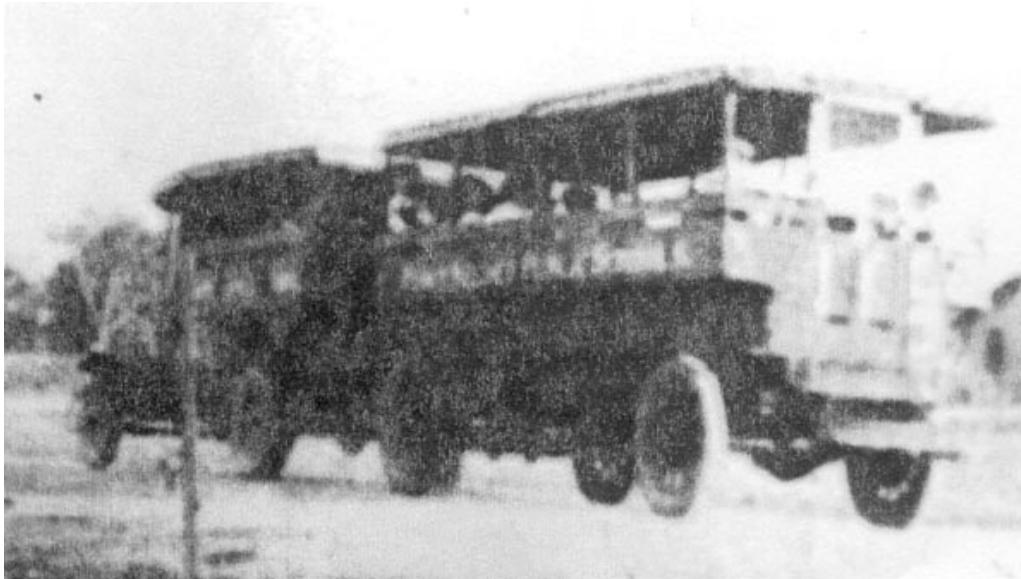
As a result of a petition by the parents, a free kindergarten was started in 1920. A qualified teacher was employed. Children from five to seven years old attended until they were ready for first grade.

In addition to the kindergarten, ten standard grades were maintained in 1921. These high school subjects were taught: English, history science, mathematics and Latin. The students participated in Interscholastic League events. A Literary Society was maintained in every room. In the 1920 County Meet, the senior girls won the basketball competition.

The School Review of Jefferson County of 1921 lists these teachers and their salaries: J.H. Hicks, \$2400 per annum; Mrs. J.H. Hicks, \$175 per month; Mrs. John F. Jordan, \$120 per month; Julia McMeans, \$120 per month; Angela Grote, \$120 per month; Wyche McMeans, \$120 per month; Jennivie Smith, \$120 per month; Ruby Alford, \$133.33 per month; Mrs. Louise price \$130 per month; Maude Hamil, \$140 per month; and Mrs. Nevada Callender, \$130 per month.

In 1918 or 1919, Port Neches had its first graduating class, one graduate. There were five seniors at the May 7, 1920, graduation ceremonies in the Liberty Theatre located in "Old Town." The 1923 graduating class was the first from the Port Neches schools to come near acquiring college entrance accreditation.

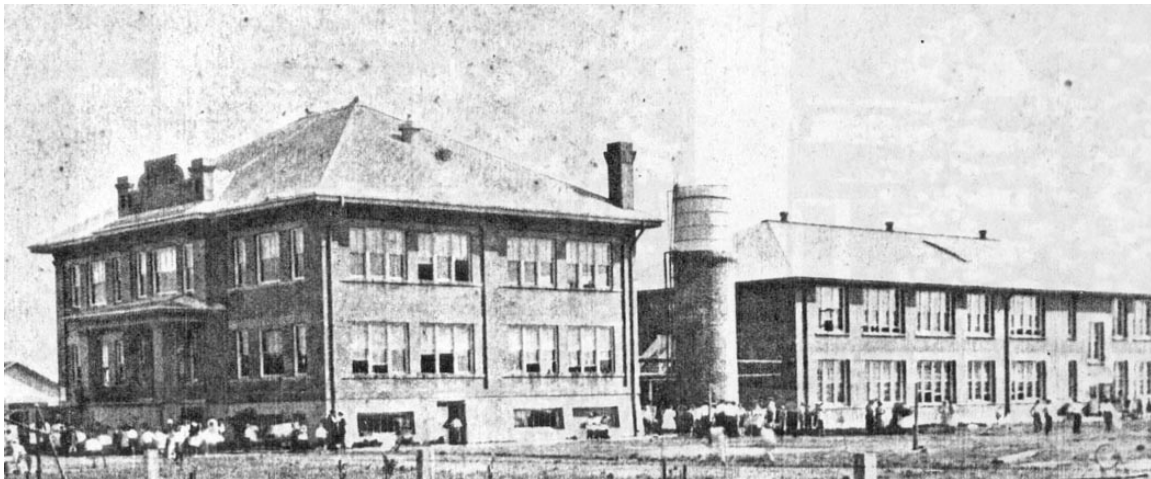
While some people were building homes more to the west of the school, most of the businesses generally remained in "Old Town" before 1921. The removal of the bank and post office to "New Town" caused much business to move to Port Neches Avenue where a few earlier businesses had already located. Many of the buildings found along Port Neches Avenue today were built about 1923.



1923 School Bus that also transported Groves students.

According to the Deed Records of Jefferson County, Volume No. 243, page 522, dated July 28, 1924, the C.O. Baird Estate sold an additional five acres of land to the school district for \$3750.00. That made expansion of school facilities and programs possible.

Several important events occurred in 1925. The 39<sup>th</sup> Legislature created the Port Neches Common School District No. 16 containing 20 and 56/100 square miles. This was recorded under House Bill No. 5, Chapter 123, Page 363.



1923 picture of C.O. Baird Building I, and Building II

Mr. Block, in his memoirs, candidly told about his early days at the C.O. Baird School. "I well recall my first day in school in September, 1926. My teacher at the old C.O. Baird School was a Mrs. Ephlin from Groves, and all of the first grade was in her room. And of all things, I got a paddling on my first day in school! I recall that incident well, I suppose, because she left a lasting imprint on both my trousers and mind. It was a



minor infraction as I recall--I didn't wait to follow her instructions and 'loused up' on my little pasting project--and she might well have settled on a lesser degree of punishment, considering it was my first day. But she didn't, and I suppose chose to make an example of me, and in that respect she probably succeeded. You can bet that I gave her no more trouble during that year."

St. Catherine's Parochial School opened in the early 1922 offering a school for students from Catholic homes who wanted their young children educated in a religion oriented classroom. In the early years the number of grades taught depended on enrollment. Classes were held in a wooden building only a few blocks from C.O. Baird School. A new church and school named St. Elizabeth's was built in 1960. Classes were finally suspended in 1970 when enrollment declined.

A new Port Neches High School building was constructed in 1925 at a cost of approximately \$175,000.00. It was said to be the first modern school building erected in Jefferson County. A covered walkway connecting to Buildings I and II was also built. All buildings were heated with steam heat fired from an oil-burning boiler located at the rear of the high school building. Electric lights were installed in all rooms. The cafeteria, Home Economic Cottage, and laboratories were supplied with natural gas. The high school had a combination gym and auditorium. There were metal dividing curtains operated by four electric motors that could be used to divide the area in the auditorium/gym into two separate rooms. The school district for the 1925-26 year had an enrollment of 658 pupils, 20 graduated. There were 19 district employees.

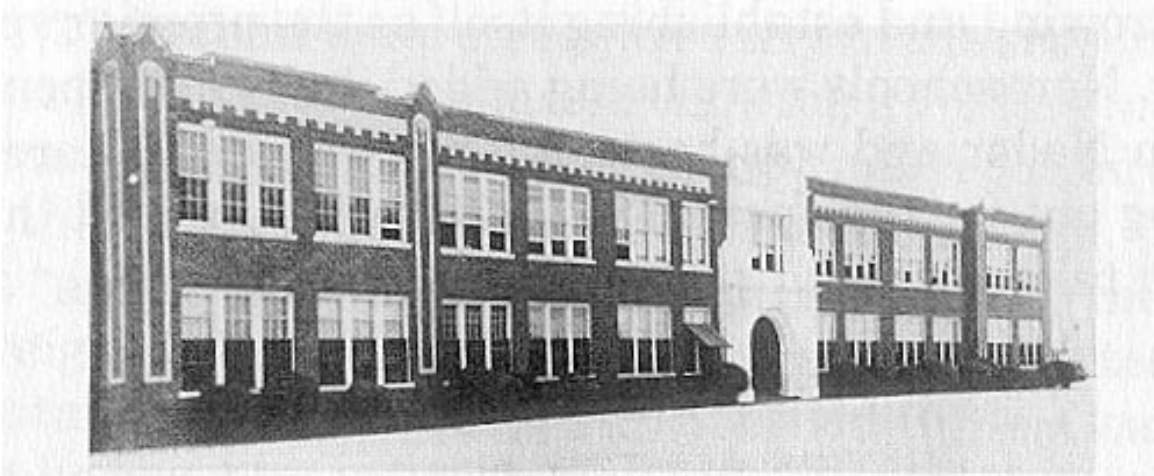
According to Buck Ford's, Down Trails of Victory, until 1925 Port Neches was a basketball school. Luther "Red" Garner, a teacher at the high school, was willing to sponsor those boys who wanted to form a football team. They played four games in 1925: at Silsbee October 10, at Nederland October 24, at home vs. Nederland November 7, and at home vs. the independent Beaumont Tigers on November 14. There was no bus for the players to get to Silsbee, so players had to catch rides on Model T Fords by the few parents who had one. Port Neches lost to Silsbee 7-0, lost to Nederland in the first game 7-0, won against Nederland at home 13-7, and PN beat the Beaumont team 45-0. There was no band or pep squad that year.

The first football field played on by the 1925 team was located at the end of Ave. A. (now Grigsby Street) where it intersected with Spur 136 and curved into the Texaco Asphalt Refinery. The field ran parallel to the river, near the river's edge. There were no stands, lights or scoreboard. Fans stood on the sideline and walked up and down the field in relation to the football if they wanted a better view. Thus started the long history of Port Neches football.

Al Brooks, interviewed by Buck Ford, said that in about 1925 a committee met to choose school colors and mascot. The superintendent appointed a committee of students. Brooks said, "We selected purple and white. We thought they were pretty, and I guess we were influenced a little bit by the fact Beaumont High School had those. Beaumont was so strong and so popular and well-liked we may have just copied theirs." Brooks went on to say, "We finally selected the name 'Indians.' We must have had some reason, but I can't recall why. But we selected the name 'Indians' and purple and white."

(Interestingly, "Indians" was an ideal mascot since archeological evidence found in between Port Neches Park and Texaco revealed that that area was the home of an

Attakapas Indian tribe that left six large Indian burial mounds. It could well be said that true Indians had lived in Port Neches in 1700s, but none were real Port Neches Indians, as they are known today. The committee chose "Indians" as the school mascot likely being unaware of the Attakapas tribe since the mounds had been removed many years earlier and no evidence of an Indian village remained.)



*Port Neches High School--Home of the 1926 Indians*

The school song, based on the tune Our Director, was chosen later. It also was the same tune as that of the Beaumont High School Royal Purples. Beaumont High's image was very influential on the new high school in Port Neches.

It is not known when the words to the school song were written or who the scribe was, but the Indian school song may have shown up in the '30s about the time the band began performing at football games.

In 1929, two new buses were purchased at a cost of \$6300.00. Prior to that, a Ford bus with seats along the sides and down the middle was used. That bus pulled a trailer bus hitched to the rear. The trailer was constructed about the same time as the bus. Both those vehicles had cushioned seats and curtains down the sides, which could be fastened during inclement weather. Two young men named Grasse operated them. They were paid \$35.00 per month. After the new buses were purchased, the old bus was operated for a short additional time. The trailer was junked. Mr. E.S. Bellair and two mechanics, on a budget of approximately \$6,000.00 per year, operated this department. This department also cared for the campus, building, gas and water lines, and the steam plant.

Those two buses were used mainly to transport pupils from the Groves area to Port Neches High School. Pupils were transported from the south area of Port Neches also, as that area had started to grow.

The Groves area was also growing rapidly. In 1929, the first section of the Groves Elementary building was erected. Previously, students in that area had traveled either to Port Neches or Port Arthur to attend school.

In 1929, Building I housed the primary school which consisted of a kindergarten, four first grades, three second grades and three third grades. Building II housed three

classes each of the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. The third building housed the junior and senior high schools. There were 35 teachers and supervisors, and 810 students.

A bond issue for \$50,000.00 was passed by a majority of five to one to be used for repairs, new equipment, and a \$40,000.00 building.

Standardized tests were given in English, Spanish, and Latin. Achievement tests were given in all grades. Classification tests were given in grade school. Two sets of Intelligence Tests (Otis and Detroit) were given throughout the school. A Pintner-Cunningham test was given in kindergarten and first grade.

The students used the most modern adjustable type desks of the day in 1929. Portable victrolas and records were supplied to classrooms.

Some courses taught were foods, physics, chemistry, biology, general science, art, commercial work, music appreciation, physical training, home economics, group singing and manual art. The music appreciation room had three pianos and three victrolas.

The student's day began at 8:30 a.m. with the pledge of allegiance to the flag, followed by the singing of America. They were dismissed at 3:30 p.m. and required to remain on campus during those hours.

The motto of the school at that time was: "Be true to the best that is in you and follow it on to the goal." Members of the Board of Trustees were A.L. Clark, a leading merchant; F. Maurin and W.E. Parsons, Texas Company officials. Tom H. Tuttle assumed the position of Superintendent in September 1927.

The High School Principal was Gilbert J. Jordan. The salary rate set in 1927 was \$125 to \$160 in the primary and grade schools, \$130 to \$165 in junior high, and \$160 to \$230 per month in the senior high school. That did not include principals' salaries. Each new teacher had to have a degree from a standard college or university and two years experience in a graded school. This did not include library or kindergarten teachers. Teachers also had to travel or attend a university at least half of the summer.

The 1930s saw little construction in the district as the country was in the throes of the Great Depression. Money was very tight in all quarters, but the district was able to add two more sections to fast growing Groves Elementary School, and by 1944 all three sections of that school had been built.

Pictures from the Texaco archives show some families living on crude, small houseboats tied up along the river's edge. Some of those floating hovels had children who likely attended Port Neches schools at least part time. Block wrote the following about his memories of one houseboat family: "I recall well one family of house boat people who were living in Block's Bayou in 1932. My mother and I happened to go visit the family shortly after their arrival near our home. In the outside area ashore, five or six small children, their clothing in tatters, were playing, whereas inside the houseboat, a toddler crawled about on the floor and a young mother breast-fed her infant. The mother was also attempting to boil the meat cut from a turtle, and elsewhere in their abode, there was not even the salt needed to flavor the turtle soup with. Driven almost to the point of tears, Mama went home and killed and cooked a chicken. Then she gathered up from around the house the rudiments of a well-stocked kitchen, corn meal, flour, salt, coffee, lard, bacon, eggs, butter, etc., and along with 100 lbs. each of Irish and sweet potatoes. She made my father and me deliver the food to the houseboat. There was no welfare board or other agency for indigent families to turn to for help then."

During the 1930s, Mr. Ernest Volpe, who had built band programs at Nederland and Silsbee, developed the band program in Port Neches High School from a squad of 20 original members to about 175. There was no band program for a few WW II years. Volpe's stepson, Frank Gioviale, came to Port Neches High in 1946, started a band program with 27 students, according to Ford's book, and stayed several years developing many of the traditions associated with PN-GHS.

Gioviale approached Irene Ford, high school teacher and mother to the future author of Down Trails of Victory, about forming a group of girls later to be known as the Indianettes. Their first appearance was in 1951 with eight participants. Cherokee, the fight song, became a part of PNHS performances a few years later. The Marching I began about the same time. Lynne Jeffrey, a drum major and valedictorian of the senior class of 1960, wrote lyrics to the fight song. Today she is Lynne James and the principal of Port Neches Middle School. Jamie Rohe was the first Indian Spirit in 1961.

The value of buildings and contents in 1942-43 was \$355,100.00. There were 58 employees, 79 graduates and an enrollment of 1732.

The years during World War II were hectic for the school system, particularly in Port Neches. During those years the country's war effort brought significant industrial, economic and population changes in the district. In 1942, the U.S. government working with private industry built a synthetic rubber complex in Port Neches that gave the city the title of "Synthetic Rubber Capital of the World." Neches Butane, Goodrich and Firestone were built on the remains of C.O. Baird's land, some 730 acres, for \$100,000,000. Between 10,000 and 15,000 construction jobs were created during that mammoth push to build a synthetic rubber complex to supply desperately needed rubber for the war effort. School children stood by the fence that separated the school yard and the complex, and watched construction and operation of the complex.

There was a severe housing shortage during those frantic months. Residents rented out vacant rooms to construction workers. The area across from Port Neches Park was turned into a temporary housing space as scores of trailer houses were moved in. Hundreds of new houses and new apartments were built. Port Neches' population grew from 2,000 in 1941 to 5,800 in 1943.

Classroom space was so burdened that elementary classes went on half-day schedules for a period of time. One former teacher reported teaching in a temporary school that had no water or electricity in Camp Neches where small houses had been constructed for construction workers. The teacher and children went home for lunch.

City government and school space became an issue since most land was owned. The property from the Neches River to Kansas City Railroad, and from Park Street to Merriman where Port Neches-Groves administration building, PN-G High School and stadium, City of Port Neches buildings, etc. had an interesting history. T.F. McKinney had sold land to Grigsby that included that parcel of land. Some of that property was eventually sold to C.O. Baird who gave a two-acre plot to the community for a school. T. F. McKinney sold the western one-third of the McKinney league, the 1,476-acre track between Park Street and Wilson Street to William Smith of Orange in January 1860, for \$1,460. Smith sold the same tract to Lastie Hillebrandt who began to sell off small tracts of land to German immigrants. (Several other land transactions took place over time.)

The building of the Kansas City Southern Railroad within two miles of Port Neches in 1897 had the most far-reaching effect. The railroad spawned a half-dozen other

companies, the main one being the Port Arthur Land Company, which in 1893 bought up all the prairie land surrounding Grigsby's Bluff (50,000 acres) except a few farms along the river. The land company surveyed the town sites of Port Arthur and Nederland.

The Port Arthur Land Company, in late 1897, had a right-of-way the width of Port Neches Park and inland for about two miles. That 73-acre strip of land was used for the next 22 years to provide the water supply for the residents of Port Arthur. Until 1904 Neches River water was pumped through an underground cypress-lined main. The river became brackish so three water wells were dug in the park area to supply fresh water to the city of Port Arthur.

The City of Port Arthur gained ownership of that same 73-acre strip of land between Merriman and Park Streets, and from the river to present Hwy 366. As early as December 1941, the City of Port Arthur had been pressing Port Neches to buy, rather than lease, the 73-acre strip after Port Arthur no longer needed the property. In January 1942, a small bond issue for that purpose carried.

Three months later, 24 acres of that land were sold to the Port Neches School District. Port Arthur retained one-half of the mineral rights and stipulated that the land in the 73-acre plot must remain in public ownership. That strip today includes Port Neches Park, the Senior Citizen's Building, City Hall and Fire Station, city water plant, armory, Port Neches-Groves High School, Indian Stadium, city maintenance department, Hebert Library and several athletic facilities, all for public use.

Linda Briggs, high school teacher, said in her online history of Port Neches-Groves High School that from 1942-1945 World War II dominated education. Eighteen year-old boys who were passing were drafted and received diplomas. Younger boys had to have parent permission to volunteer. School officials approved advancing diplomas to those.

One teacher of the '40s describes the difficult school situations during the war as the "worst conditions Port Neches schools had ever seen." Port Neches schools had to make adjustments, as the war effort placed demands on most every facet of American life. Schools closed up to two days at a time because of gasoline rationing. Many other commonly used household items such as shoes were rationed or were in short supply. In June 1942, the Midcounty Ration Board met and sugar was rationed. On February 22, 1943, schools closed again on the day of registration for ration book #2. Rationed items in 1943 included gasoline, tires, shoes, meat, sugar, coffee and all canned and processed foods.

Schools reported 1,711 students enrolled during the spring semester of 1943 with eighty seniors graduating. New students arrived weekly. As 1943 drew to a close, the Port Neches school district received a \$26,000 grant from the Federal government. A school crisis grew worse as 2,545 students were enrolled in the spring semester, 1,532 in Port Neches alone. Port Neches schools graduated 73 seniors in May 1944. The school crisis began to subside in late 1944 as enrollment began to decline because construction at the rubber plant complex was completed and many families had moved away.

One former student recalled the band playing The Beer Barrel Polka after each touchdown. Indians athletics were reclassified in '44 to upper division and were beaten by Port Arthur 89-0. Students led a Strike in 1946 to keep the popular head football coach. That resulted in immediate concessions by the school board, but later that spring, a new school board was elected along with a new superintendent, new high school principal and new head coach.

The district became Port Neches Independent School District by an order of the County School Board of Jefferson County, Texas, dated April 10, 1945. That order was validated by the 50<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the State of Texas in the General Validating Act of 1947. At some point during those years a Quonset hut type cafeteria building was constructed just to the north of Building I to serve lunch to the growing school body. The district graduated 72 seniors in 1945. Also, the school board voted to create the office of assessor-collector of taxes.

Stadium lights were installed during 1946 that allowed night games at the Main Street stadium. Also, the Indians were undefeated and untied, and won the Regional Championship. (That was as high as they could go that year.) In 1947 the Indians kept Nederland from gaining a first down all game and beat them 71-0.

Groves Junior High, the district's oldest building in use today, was built about 1948-49. After that time the value of building and contents had increased to \$1,137,524.00 for the 1949-50 school year. There were 98 employees, 2373 students and 135 graduates. An addition was built in 1967 along with a complete renovation of the existing junior high building.

Port Neches School District went through a remarkable transition in the 1950s being transformed into a modern, quality district. During the fall of 1950, a new stadium was under construction at the corner of Ave. D and Park Street. At the time, the stands from the Indians' regular stadium on Main Street were being moved over to the new stadium. Neither stadium was available for use, so that year so Port Neches officials contracted with Nederland school officials to rent Bulldog Stadium as the site of the Indians' home games, according to Ford's book.

A massive building program was instituted during that decade that resulted in eight new schools and a new administration building being dedicated.

The new Port Neches High School on Merriman Street was first used in the fall of 1953. The former high school building on Main Street became Port Neches Junior High School. (That building today is part of the rubber plant complex.)

The football teams won two class 3-A State Championships in 1953 and 55, and lost the championship game in 1954. All the 1953-playoff games were played in Indian Stadium.

By 1954-55, the value of buildings and contents had reached a high of \$4,201,142.00. Graduates numbered 184 out of an enrollment of 3,444. The district had 162 full-time employees including teachers, administrators and custodians.

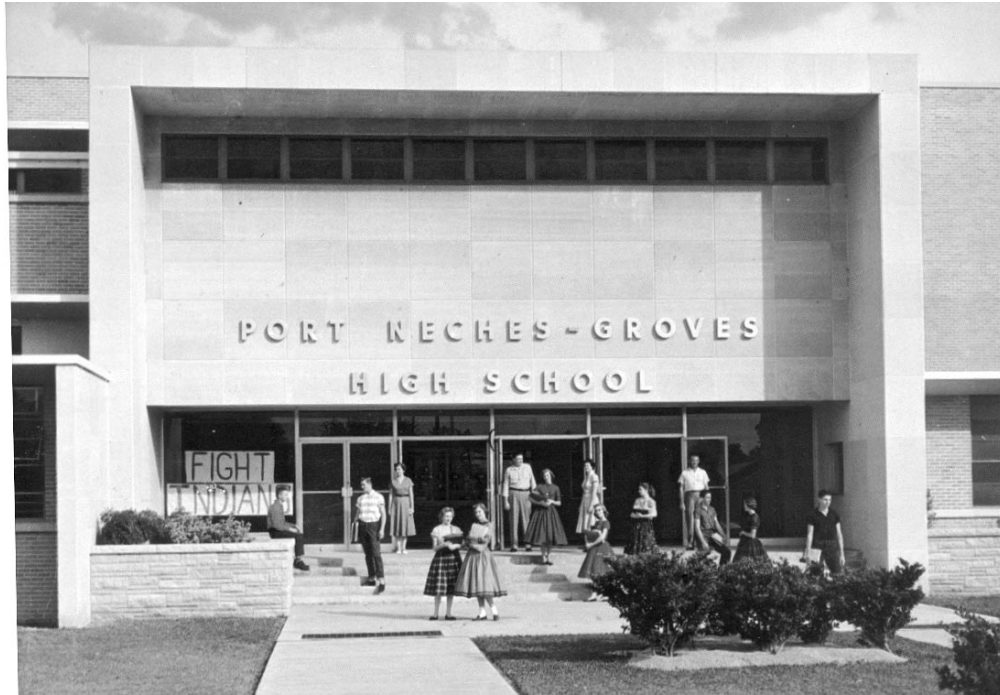
The high school's name became Port Neches-Groves High School starting the 1956-57 school year.

All academic and athletic programs continued to grow. Port Neches-Groves developed dominance in girl's volleyball with the 1972 team winning the State Championship. Two other state titles would be won in addition to winning many district championships in coming years.

Port Neches-Groves High School football team was a powerful force in area football with the 1975 team winning the Class 4-A State Championship. Other district championships and trips in to the state playoffs were to follow. Enrollment at PN-GHS for the 1975-76 year was 1,032, grades ten through twelve.

By 1975 Port Neches-Groves ISD had established itself as a quality school system with programs that were copied by some and envied by many. It had grown from a

ragtag lot of mostly poor kids known as “River Rats” in the early years, to a school system that received statewide recognition for its academics as well as its athletics. Its community support and school traditions have become legend.



### **CHRONOLOGY OF SCHOOL HISTORY**

- 1882: School corner of Lee and Marion in Port Neches
- 1886: Sycamore School opened in Abbeville
- 1895: Nall Street School opened
- 1911: C.O. Baird School built on Main Street, first official public school
- 1919: First Port Neches graduate
- 1923: First school bus, mainly transporting students from Groves to Port Neches
- 1923: First graduating class  
Second building added to C.O. Baird building
- 1925: Port Neches Common School District #16  
Port Neches High School completed on Main Avenue  
Committee chose school colors: Purple and White, and Indian mascot:  
First football game against Silsbee, then Nederland
- 1929: Groves Elementary School built
- 1933: First district football championship
- 1936: Indian band performed at halftime; pep squad had purple and white uniforms; Betty Ruth Wager was the first drum major
- 1940: New stadium seated 4000 on Main Street
- 1942: 12<sup>th</sup> grade system started
- 1945: County Common School District #16 became Port Neches Independent School District

- 1949: Groves Junior High built (now Groves Elementary)
- 1950: Woodcrest Elementary was dedicated
- 1951: Completion of new stadium on Park Street  
Indianettes were formed
- 1952: 3A Classification
- 1953: Completion of Port Neches High School on Merriman  
Football team won 3A State Championship in Indian Stadium
- 1954: High school gym built
- 1955: Completion of West Groves Elementary (West Groves Education Center)  
Port Neches Elementary dedicated  
Football team won 3A State Championship  
“Cherokee” played at halftime
- 1956: High school name changed to Port Neches-Groves High School
- 1958: Completion of Port Neches Junior High (Port Neches Middle School),  
Van Buren Elementary dedicated  
Ridgewood Elementary Schools dedicated
- 1959: Woodlawn Junior High (Groves Middle School) dedicated
- 1961: First Indian Spirit—Jamie Rohe
- 1962: B-Wing added to PNG
- 1963: New high school cafeteria
- 1965: Taft Elementary dedicated
- 1972: Rock-a-Noos volleyball team won State Championship
- 1975: Indians football team won State Championship in Texas Stadium  
\$7.9 million bond issue passed for building additions and air conditioning