

# **Historic Resources Report Isbell Middle School 221 S. Fourth Street, Santa Paula, CA**

**29 October 2021**

## **Prepared for:**

**Santa Paula Unified School District  
500 E. Santa Barbara Street  
Santa Paula CA 93060**

## **Prepared by:**



## Executive Summary

This report was prepared for the purpose of assisting the Santa Paula Unified School District in their compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as it relates to historic resources, in connection with the potential demolition of building(s) at Isbell Middle School, a 14.05 acre parcel located at 221 S. Fourth Street in Santa Paula (APN 103-0-220-535). [Figure 1]

Isbell School was listed as Ventura County Landmark No. 143 and City of Santa Paula Historic Landmark No. 14 in February, 1992. Consequently the property should be considered a historic resource for the purposes of CEQA.

This report was prepared by San Buenaventura Research Associates of Santa Paula, California, Judy Triem, Historian; and Mitch Stone, Preservation Planner, for the Santa Paula Unified School District, and is based on a prior report on Isbell Middle School completed by SBRA in 2008, as well as field investigation conducted May, 2021 for the purpose of updating the earlier findings. The previous report was prepared for the purpose of evaluating a number of alterations to the school buildings proposed at that time, none of which were implemented.

San Buenaventura Research Associates provides qualified Historian and Architectural Historian services, in accordance with *Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications* (36 CFR 61). The conclusions contained herein represent the professional opinions of San Buenaventura Research Associates, and are based on the factual data available at the time of its preparation, the application of the appropriate local, state and federal regulations, and best professional practices.

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Figure 1. Property Location and Historic Features [Apple Maps]

## 1. Impact Thresholds and Mitigation

According to the Public Resources Code, “a project that may cause a substantial change in the significance of an historical resource is a project that may have a significant effect on the environment.” The Public Resources Code broadly defines a threshold for determining if the impacts of a project on an historic property will be significant and adverse. By definition, a substantial adverse change means, “demolition, destruction, relocation, or alterations,” such that the significance of an historical resource would be impaired. For purposes of NRHP eligibility, reductions in a property’s integrity (the ability of the property to convey its significance) should be regarded as potentially adverse impacts. (PRC §21084.1, §5020.1(6))

Further, according to the CEQA Guidelines, “an historical resource is materially impaired when a project... [d]emolishes or materially alters in an adverse manner those physical characteristics of an historical resource that convey its historical significance and that justify its inclusion in, or eligibility for, inclusion in the California Register of Historical Resources [or] that account for its inclusion in a local register of historical resources pursuant to section 5020.1(k) of the Public Resources Code or its identification in an historical resources survey meeting the requirements of section 5024.1(g) of the Public Resources Code, unless the public agency reviewing the effects of the project establishes by a preponderance of evidence that the resource is not historically or culturally significant.”

The lead agency is responsible for the identification of “potentially feasible measures to mitigate significant adverse changes in the significance of an historical resource.” The specified methodology for determining if impacts are mitigated to less than significant levels are the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings* and the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* (1995), publications of the National Park Service. (CCR §15064.5(b)(3))

## 2. Historic Context

The boom of the 1920s brought tremendous growth to Santa Paula, and along with it, the problem of schools becoming too small and outdated to accommodate the increased population. In March 1925 contracts were submitted to construct two new schools in Santa Paula, a grade school near Ojai Road called Canyon School, later renamed Barbara Webster School, and a new large middle school on Harvard Boulevard and S. Fourth Street. The middle school was proposed to be constructed within the new Lee Ireland and Taussig Subdivision on S. Fourth Street, which had opened in 1922. Within a year, half of the lots on S. Fourth Street featured new houses. The placement of the new school within this newly-developing area of Santa Paula was no doubt due to the availability of a large parcel of land adjacent to the subdivision to the east. The school building was designed by Santa Paula architect Roy C. Wilson, assisted by his father-in-law Edwin Thorne, with associate Peter Ficker of Los Angeles. Thomas H. Reed of Los Angeles was the general contractor.

When the new school was being planned in the spring of 1925, the first name considered was Harvard School, after the adjacent thoroughfare, but it would be named instead the Isbell School, when Members of the Pioneer Section of the Ebell Club submitted a winning proposal to the school board to name the school for Olive Mann Isbell.<sup>1</sup> She was then known as the “first American schoolteacher in California,” having taken up teaching at Mission Santa Clara upon her arrival in pre-statehood California with her husband Isaac in 1846. He was a physician who served briefly as the Surgeon of the California Battalion in the same year. After their retirement, the couple moved to Santa Paula during the 1870s and became well known in the small town. Olive Isbell died at the age of 74 on March 26, 1899, after a brief illness and was buried in the Santa Paula

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<sup>1</sup> Santa Paula Chronicle: 3-16-1925, 5-18-1925.

Cemetery. Attesting to the high regard citizens of Santa Paula held for Olive Isbell, it was said “to be the most largely attended funeral ever held in Ventura County up to that time.” The connection between the school and Olive Mann Isbell remained strong. In 1908 the Current Events Club of Santa Paula had placed a large marble slab over the grave commemorating her. Then in 1940 the Isbell School eighth grade graduating class together with “pioneer friends” affixed a metal tablet to the marble declaring that “perpetual care had been provided for the grave.” <sup>2</sup>

The main school building was completed in the fall of 1925 and dedicated in February 1926 with much fanfare and distinguished speakers. The Grand President of the Native Sons of the Golden West, Fletcher A. Cutler, stated that the school “will be a monument not for today or tomorrow but the the years to come,” and that he was surprised to find such a “large and beautiful school in so small a city.” He complimented the school board in naming the school for the “first American woman school teacher in California.” The Ebell Club presented a plaque to the school in memory of Olive Mann Isbell, and the Native Sons placed a plaque declaring that the “building is dedicated to truth-liberty-tolerance.” <sup>3</sup> At the time the Isbell School was constructed, it was the largest school building in Santa Paula. Its two-story compact plan was the latest in school design and noted for its administrative efficiency. Following the school’s completion, an article was published in the *Santa Paula Chronicle* describing the many special features of the new building, written by Isbell eighth grader Phoebe Churchill, who won a prize for her essay. <sup>4</sup>

Over its history the school has weathered two major disasters. The first was the 1928 St. Francis Dam break, when the flood waters apparently reached the first floor windows of the school and filled the basement with mud. After the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and the passage of the Field Act, two-story schools were no longer constructed in California. In 1939 the main school and manual arts building were seismically strengthened and substantially altered to meet Field Act requirements using PWA (Public Works Administration) funds under the New Deal program.<sup>5</sup> The architects for the alterations to the school were Roy C. Wilson and Geoffry N. Lawford. In between these events, a second flood occurred in 1938, during one of California’s most severe storm seasons. As a result, low concrete walls, berms and wooden gates were proposed to be constructed around the school as part of the seismic retrofitting project. Initially the flood wall project proved too costly to construct, but it remained an urgent consideration and funding was later found to complete it. While the work, which took most of the year to complete, was underway nearly six-hundred Isbell students were taught in double sessions at other schools in Santa Paula, returning to their transformed school in December. <sup>6</sup>

The 14 acre campus has grown since with the addition of new buildings. The Manual Arts building was constructed in 1929, designed by architects Roy C. Wilson and Robert S. Raymond. The Multi-purpose (Cafetorium) building was designed by local Santa Paula architect Robert S. Raymond in 1954 but not constructed until 1956. This building was not included in the landmark nominations because it was not yet fifty years of age when the school and manual arts building were designated. However, it is now over fifty years of age. The remainder of buildings on the campus include modern portable buildings behind the main school building

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<sup>2</sup> Santa Paula Daily Chronicle, 2-28-1967.

<sup>3</sup> Santa Paula Chronicle: 2-15-1926, 2-27-1926.

<sup>4</sup> Santa Paula Chronicle, 3-9-1926.

<sup>5</sup> Santa Paula Chronicle, 12-9-1938.

<sup>6</sup> Santa Paula Chronicle: 3-22-1939, 4-12-1939, 4-13-1939, 9-23-1939, 12-16-1939.

and near Ventura Street as well as the recently constructed gymnasium building, a shower/restroom building constructed in 1969, and a quonset building constructed at an unknown date. [Figure 1]

### ***Period of Significance***

The purpose of establishing a period of significance for a historic property is to provide a means for establishing the physical features created during its period of significance and that convey its significance to a viewer. The character defining features of a historic building depend on the type of building, and can include its function, materials, details, method of construction, or architectural style, and other elements that contribute to its sense of time and place. A period of significance for the property was not established in the landmark designations for the property. In considering this issue today, the period 1924 to 1971 covers the construction of the extant buildings on the property and its active use as a school.

### **3. Description of Contributing Buildings**

The Ventura County and City of Santa Paula landmark designations for the Olive Mann Isbell School from 1992 does not specify the buildings on the property that contributed to its eligibility at that time. In general buildings constructed during the period of significance for the property or altered during this period of significance should be considered as contributors, including some that might not have been in 1992, as they were not then fifty years of age. The period of significance for this property defined today would begin with the beginning of school construction in 1924 and end in 1971 (fifty years ago). This period would include the Main School Building, Manual Arts and Cafetorium, buildings, constructed in 1924, 1929, and 1956 respectively. These buildings are described below, and alterations, to the extent they are known, will be described. Other buildings on the campus constructed during this period include the Locker and Shower building (1969) located at the southeastern corner of the campus adjacent to the athletic fields, and a small quonset building (undated) to the north of the Main School Building. Alterations to the campus buildings made after 1971 should generally be regarded as non-character defining features that do not contribute to the significance and eligibility of the property. These would include the numerous portable buildings on the campus and the gymnasium building constructed circa 2004.

#### ***Main School Building (1925)***

The two story school building was designed in a modified u-plan with a long rectangular front (western) elevation of the building facing onto Fourth Street with short hipped roof wings attached at each end on the west side of the building. The medium hip roof is covered with clay tiles. Decorative carved brackets are located under the overhanging eaves. Long hipped wings are located on the east side of the building forming the u-shape. At the end of the southern wing is a one story section with a flat roof. The northern wing is one story with a flat roof. Approximately eight chimneys punctuate the roofline.

The front of the building is divided into four bays with a band of five symmetrically placed windows on both first and second floors. The two story recessed front entrance is centered with two sets of double wood and glass doors. Above the doors rise multi-paned glass and steel windows that rise to the second floor level below the roofline. Windows are divided into three parts with wood casings and between each band of windows are either single or pairs of narrow windows. Some of these windows have been boarded up. The rear elevation contains a small two-story tower with a hipped tile roof and clock, added sometime after 1940. The building is covered with shot-on concrete. [Photos 1-5]





Historic Photo 1. Isbell Middle School, Fourth Street elevation, circa 1927.

**Alterations.** When the building was constructed in 1925 it was designed in the Italian Renaissance style with ornate art stone columns, a balcony, art stone block finish, and decorative details at the front and side and rear entries. The red brick was laid in a Flemish bond pattern. Windows were multi-paned double hung wood with a transom in the upper portion that pivoted inward. [Historic Photo 1]

Following the Long Beach earthquake in 1933 and the adoption of the Field Act, schools constructed of brick, especially two story schools, were required to be seismically retrofitted. In 1939 architects Roy C. Wilson and Geoffry H. Lawford designed plans for major alterations to the school building to bring it up to code. All of the ornamental openings, columns, arches, and art stone (cast stone) were removed. The hipped roof over the main entrance was removed. The brick was either removed and/or covered over with concrete. Concrete chimneys replaced the brick chimneys. In 1989-90 the original multi-paned wood windows were replaced with current tinted three-paned aluminum sash windows within the original window openings. [Historic Photo 2]

#### ***Manual Arts (shop) Building (1929)***

The one story shop building is square in plan with a flat roof and raised parapet. The front (western elevation) of the building features a single door entrance above a concrete stoop with metal railings. On either side of the centered entry are two small boarded-up windows and a band of three windows on the upper half of the building. Windows are multi-paned steel. Horizontal vents are found below the parapet on all sides of the building. The same bands of multi-paned windows are located on the remaining elevations. The northern and eastern elevations each contain a single entrance. The building is constructed of brick masonry that has been covered with gunite on the exterior. The interior features a wood truss ceiling and wood floors. [Photos 6, 7]

**Alterations.** The Manual Training (shop) building was designed as a smaller, simplified version of the main school building when it was constructed in 1929. Its major decorative features were wrought iron grills above



Historic Photo 2. Isbell Middle School, Fourth Street elevation, perhaps circa 1960.

the entrance and over the adjacent small windows. The front door on the west elevation was a double door each with four panels surrounded by plaster quoins. Several steps with a buttress on each side lead up to the front door. The exterior finish was brick with a concrete belt course running across all elevations above the windows just below the parapet. Changes to the building included the gunite over the exterior brick and the removal of the wrought iron grills over the entry and small windows as a part of the 1939 seismic retrofit project for the campus.

***Multi-Purpose (Cafetorium) Building (1956)***

This rectangular plan building features projecting wings on the southern elevation creating a modified t-plan. The building is a combination one and two-story building with a main low gable roof with overhanging eaves. The one story roof sections are flat and hip roofed. The eastern and western elevations feature a band of multi-paned steel windows on the upper portion of the building under the eaves. Two attached flat roofed entrances are found on the eastern elevation. The northern elevation features a flat roofed section with a band of multi-paned steel windows on the first floor. The building is covered with stucco. [Photos 8, 9]

**Alterations.** In 1966 a two-story music room addition was made to the southern elevation matching the roofline and materials of the original 1956 building. Another small concrete block addition was made to the northwestern corner of the building at an unknown date after 1966.



### ***Landscape Features***

The present landscape features on the school grounds include the front lawn, numerous trees, shrubs, playing fields and parking areas. The front of the school is set back from Fourth Street with a lawn area and circular asphalt drive with parking spaces. Several mature and young trees are located in the lawn area and adjacent to the building. They include palm trees, eucalyptus trees, a large mature pine tree and several low shrubs and bulbs. A low concrete wall runs along the front of the school adjacent to the sidewalk. At either end are concrete steps and pipe railing going over the wall. This wall was constructed in 1939 as a response to the flooding in 1928 and 1938. A series of improvements were made at this time that included yard grading, concrete flood walls, and steps over the wall.

The courtyard area behind the school building is covered with asphalt and contains a few young trees as well as several mature trees. Grassy playing fields are located north of the main building. The main parking lot is located off Harvard Boulevard east of the Cafetorium.

**Changes.** The landscape features on the Isbell campus have changed considerably over time. The original landscape from 1925 included a large grassy lawn area in front of the main building with two shrub lined gravel pathways extending from the street to the front of the school and then turning to continue to the main entry. A number of trees were planted in front of the building. Some of those included pines and cypress trees. It does not appear that any of this landscaping remains today except perhaps for the trees seen at the corners of the building in early photos. The trees in these locations today may be the same ones, but it appears highly unlikely. [Historic Photo 2]

In 1939, after the 1938 flooding, concrete walls and steps over the walls were added to the front of the building. The gravel paths remained. It is uncertain when the circular drive was added, but possibly after 1964, since plans for that time show no circular drive.

## **5. Project Impacts**

Three alternatives are currently being considered by the Santa Paula Unified School District for Isbell Middle School, none of which are presently represented by fully developed plans. Consequently they will be evaluated for impact discussion purposes as general concepts or approaches.

**1. Retrofit and Modernization.** This concept is assumed to involve some degree of alterations to the historic buildings as required to bring the school buildings up to current seismic codes, and other interior and exterior treatments as may be determined necessary to improve functional conditions.

The appropriate approach for the treatment of historic buildings is embodied in the ten general principles of *Secretary's of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing of History Buildings*, and supporting materials published by the National Park Service. By operation of CEQA, the impacts of projects that can be found to conform to the Standards will be less than significant, with the assumption that treatments are evaluated and approved by a qualified Historian or Architectural Historian for conformance to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards*, and based on an inventory of character defining features. Further, adverse impacts to historic buildings may be reduced if they are treated "qualified historical buildings" for purposes of the California State Historical Building Code (SHBC), which can be utilized as a means of minimizing the need to alter character defining features of the buildings and assist in the objective of conforming the project to the *Secretary of the Interi-*

*or's Standards.* The Isbell campus should be considered eligible for the SHBC, and it can be assumed that if this approach is taken, adverse impacts will be avoided to the greatest extent feasible.

Residual impacts: Potentially less than significant.

**2. Demolition and Replacement with Facsimile Building.** This concept envisions the construction of a replacement school building duplicating the architectural appearance of the existing building.

Demolition and subsequent reproduction of entire historic buildings is not a generally accepted historic preservation technique, as it would typically render the property ineligible for listing or designation. For purposes of CEQA evaluation, the loss of the original historic building fabric triggers the finding of a significant and adverse impact on a historic resource that cannot be mitigated to a less than significant and adverse level. The reproduction might be viewed, along with documentation and commemoration, as providing partial mitigation of the impact, but would not reduce the impact to below the threshold of significant and adverse.

Residual impacts: Significant and adverse.

**3. Demolition and Replacement with New Building.** This concept envisions the construction of a replacement school building with an entirely new building.

As above, the loss of the historic building triggers the finding of significant and adverse impact. Documentation and commemoration may be seen as providing partial mitigation, but would not reduce the impact to below the threshold of significant and adverse.

Residual impacts: Significant and adverse.



Photo 1. Main School Building, western elevation, viewed from southwest. [5-24-21]



Photo 2. Main School Building, eastern elevation, viewed from northeast. [5-24-21]





Photo 3. Main School Building, northern wing, viewed from north. [5-24-21]



Photo 4. Main School Building, southern wing, viewed from northeast. [5-24-21]





Photo 5. Main School Building, southern wing, viewed from south. [5-24-21]



Photo 6. Manual Arts Building, western and southern elevations, viewed from southwest. [5-24-21]





Photo 7. Manual Arts Building, eastern and northern elevations, viewed from northeast. [5-24-21]



Photo 8. Cafetorium Building, eastern elevation, viewed from northeast. [5-24-21]





Photo 9. Cafetorium Building, eastern and southern elevations, viewed from southeast. [5-24-21]



Photo 10. Quonset Building, viewed from south. [5-24-21]