

MACKAY SCHOOLS HISTORY

by Earl Lockie, SCCHS

When the town of Mackay was born in 1901 it was a company town, laid out and developed by engineer Wayne Darlington, manager of the White Knob Copper Co. His vision for the new village was one of a substantial, modern, and progressive community, including provisions for a good school. Anticipating a large growth in population due their ambitious mining enterprise, the Company donated six lots to the village school district and built the first school house in 1901 on the SE corner of Elm and College streets. (Several times remodeled and added to, it is the present home of Greg & Lesley Szabo).

In late 1902 a new, two-story, substantial brick building was constructed with \$6000 in funds borrowed from the state by school trustees. It was located on a full city block donated by the mine company; the lot bordered by Elm, Park, White Knob, and Idanha Streets (a vacant lot today). The new school house opened in September of 1903 with a principal and three teachers employed and 75 pupils in attendance. (See photo)

But according to an article in a Mackay Telegraph newspaper of 1904, the Mackay School was already becoming crowded even though numerous single room schools covered the Lost River Valley. There were schools at the Barton and Davidson districts above Mackay, at White Knob, at Leslie, at Franklin, at Houston, at Moore, at Antelope, at King, as well as at Lost River and Arco. By 1904 the Mackay School with 130 students enrolled was offering instruction in the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades and saw a number of students from these outlying districts boarding in Mackay adding to enrollment numbers. The school needed to enlarge.

According to articles in the Mackay Miner newspapers, as the population of the valley increased, new school buildings were constructed; larger structures built at Chilly in 1910 and in Leslie in 1912. And by 1913, with Mackay's population at about 1000 and school enrollees totaling 197, school trustees could no longer put off expansion of the school in Mackay. The spring of 1913 saw construction begin on a large brick addition to the present school house, as large as the original building. And by the beginning of the fall school year in 1914, not only the new addition, but the original school had been outfitted with the latest and most up-to-date school furnishings. Electric lights would come in 1917.

The newspaper touted the enlarged and remodeled educational facility on a par with any in this area of the state and school trustees were ready to expand the curriculum to include all twelve grades along with courses in manual arts, science, and music. The Mackay School would now turn out high school graduates; students ready for a higher education at the college level.

But the enlarged school building soon proved to be inadequate as Mackay's growth increased with escalating mining activity. By 1917 with over 290 enrolled, class-crowding would force the construction of a frame annex building to house the 4th grade students. By 1920, the population of Mackay was over 1300 and school patrons approved a bond for yet another addition to the existing school structure. The new two story addition, constructed in late 1921, connected to the old school and required several significant modifications to the old school building. This new addition contained a new heating system for the entire school complex, and had a full size gymnasium, with stage and gallery on its lower floor. This oft-added to school facility would serve the community well for the next 30 years, but the future would require significant changes in Mackay's school system.

The original, large, and oft-added-to school facility served the community well for the next 30 years; through the valley drought years, the great depression, the war years of WWII, and the ups and downs of Mackay's mining industry. But as population diminished in outlying communities, some of the small one-room schools that dotted the valley early on would close and by late 1947, district patrons voted to reorganize and consolidate the school district of the area. Post war Mackay was enjoying a building boom, the town was flourishing, and as the Mackay school year began in 1948, a large enrollment of 328 students required the use of 4 buses to transport students from outlying areas.

Consolidation, with its added student numbers, soon pointed out the need for larger and more up-to-date school facilities. By the spring of 1952, trustees and patrons were discussing plans for a new Jr./Sr. high school building. The new structure, that would include a modern gymnasium, would be built on a previously purchased 11 acre lot on the south edge of town (location of the present high school). A bond was passed and a plan adopted that would keep the elementary grades 1-6 at the old school building, moving only grades 7-12 to the new school. Construction began in the spring of 1953 and the new Jr./Sr. high school was dedicated on May 20, 1954.

It wasn't but a few years though, before the inadequacies of the original old school complex were felt by the elementary classes being held there. Less than up-to-date class rooms and high heating and maintenance costs of the large old building prompted school trustees to consider yet another new school building; one to house the elementary grades. In the fall of 1966 patrons passed a bond and construction started on the new elementary school, the one present today located adjacent the high school. Completed the summer of the next year, some 224 students started classes in their new quarters with beginning of the 1967-68 school year.

This new elementary school spelled the end of a 65 year era for the original Mackay school complex and the historic brick structure was demolished in 1969 leaving only the vacant lot present there today. For the many Mackay residents who attended classes in that school it was a sad occasion.

The school students of Mackay seemed destined for a long run in their new elementary school and their new high school of 1954, but the Borah earthquake of 1983 would change that forecast. Significant structural damage to a major portion of the high school and gymnasium resulted in their condemnation and subsequent demolition; only the auditorium and library were saved. The elementary school received only minimal damage and was quickly repaired. High school students attended classes in portable classrooms until construction of the new school high school building and gymnasium was completed in 1985, the one in place today.

A review of nearly 70 years of Mackay newspapers bears witness to the strong dedication the residents of the Mackay area had to the education of their children. From the very earliest, there was always strong support in the community for school construction and upgrades, including passage of a number of bond issues. For the nearly 115 years of Mackay's history, it appears the community has always been blessed with conscientious and dedicated school board trustees who made a good education of the area's children, a priority. This was not easy for a community whose economy was based early on a fluctuating mining industry and whose rural setting and sparse population came with an inherent low tax base.