

"Turn of the Century Tour" of historic buildings in downtown Neosho

sponsored by the Newton County Historical Society

Saturday, Oct. 2, 1999 • 31st Annual Neosho Fall Festival

CENTRAL SCHOOL

By Harold G. Geyer

In 1884 the first school was started in the old Central building, comprising the middle eight rooms of this present building. The teaching staff then included Miss Ella Thatcher, Miss Nannie Gibson, Miss Flora Northcutt, Miss Nealy Davis, and Mrs. Kate Cannon. J.C. Geyer was the first principal.

It was not ascertained just the exact date when the building of the Central School was discarded, but it must have been about 1882. Prior to that time the site was occupied by a frame building, and a one-room detached brick building. It was about the year 1882 that Neosho had its first serious growing pains, and a lack of adequate school facilities was one of the symptoms.

No sooner had the building been provided for that, the district got into a big fuss about its location, and it took about 18 months to get that matter definitely determined. One faction wanted the building located on its present site and a large number wanted it located on a site in what we call "Dart" being north of the Baldry home. Some even proposed locating it on the public square at the southwest corner where McGinty's store is now located. Discussion was pretty hot. Reference to the files of the newspaper of about that date disclose that most of our then prominent citizens broke into print with articles for and against changing the site. Some of these articles were sarcastic, some judicial in tone, and some argumentative, and nearly all were well written, and evidenced the furor to which a community can work itself about a school matter. One of the arguments against the present location was the climb up the hill, and in answer to this one of the forceful writers made the statement that a teacher who could not climb this hill 20 times a day, had no business teaching. Afterwards one of his daughters taught for many years in this building and thought 12 climbs a week entirely too many.

It seems that an election was held to settle the "site" question, and that it was necessary to resort to the Circuit Court to determine the outcome of this election, the vote for the change lacking the necessary two-thirds.

But when the building was completed, it was some building for those days, and the patrons of the school and citizens generally pointed to its magnificence as it stood on this commanding height. Most of us have forgotten that there were two towers on this building, and they were easily discernable from the public square. These towers added to its architectural appearance and were much "looked up to" in those days.

But here it sat on the most beautiful location in the whole country surrounded by a forest of oaks. The path leading west down through the woods to the narrow bridge across the hollow. On the north was the Yates Pasture, now the city park. This pasture was something of a wilderness in those days, and my best recollection is that there was a rail fence along its south boundary, adjoining the school ground. This fence row was grown up in sprouts and about this time of year, when the sap is starting up the young hickories, the boys were assiduously engaged in making whistles.

The school ground equipment of that date was not very comprehensive. Parent Teachers Associations had not been invented then. A good yarn ball and a homemade bat were all the implements necessary for a game of ball. Good long clubs and a supply of tin cans would furnish plenty of fun and sore shins for a bunch of boys. And those boys had just as much fun playing shinny and ball with that primitive equipment, as the boys do now with their slides and basketballs, and all that kind of paraphernalia.

The water supply was carried from the Big Spring and there were plenty of volunteers for the work, especially during school hours. Of course it took two boys to "tote" the old cedar bucket with its copper hoops. Time was allowed to make the trip to the spring, but most of the water came from the old pipe that dripped a small stream into a half barrel near the head of the hollow. The heating system was coal stoves. About 1893 the addition of the south, including this assembly hall, was finished. It was dedicated with a big school celebration, and the steel flag pole was raised only the raising was a failure as it got only about half way up on that day and there it stuck. But anyway there were choruses of pretty girls, dressed in red, white and blue who sang America, and there were choruses of awkward boys who tried to sing the Star Spangled Banner, but were a little squeaky on the high notes. And someone made a patriotic address, and the exercises were considered a great success, and this addition marked another step in the expansion of Neosho's school system.

The old Central School had contained a main office, library, a laboratory, ten recitation rooms, and a chapel. The first through the eighth grade classes were held downstairs with the high school being upstairs. By 1916, the upstairs was deemed unsafe and no classes were held there. In 1922, the north section upstairs was renovated and the first junior high school was held there.

In 1930, the old Central building was razed and by August of 1930 the new school was ready to open. It was to contain grades one through six. Fern Cawyer served as principal from 1929 until 1936. Miss Anna Pearson became principal in 1936 and served until 1946. She was followed by Mrs. Martin Mills who served until 1952 when Mrs. Inez Harrison, the current principal, became principal.

Currently, the school houses between 200 and 300 students, in grades kindergarten through fourth. One piece of excitement for the school, lately, has been the City of Neosho drilling for the long-missing Big Spring Park Cave just north and east of the school's east playground, on top of the hillside and south of the road.

It is believed the cave may contain the skeletal remains of Southern soldiers, who died there at the hands of Union troops who became wise the Rebels using the cave as a means of hiding their troops during battle, only to bring in "reinforcements" at the last minute and win the battle.