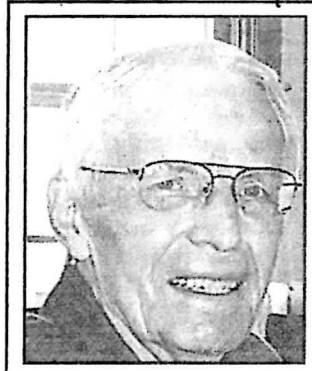


Educating Washburn's children, part three

CS 3/24/11

The Great War boom, which began in 1916, was accompanied by a large increase in the number of children attending school, from 805 in 1914-1915 to 1,081 in 1919-1920, or by 34%. The four old schools—Lincoln, Pioneer, Walker, and Garfield—were badly overcrowded. These buildings were not only out-of-date for instructional purposes, they were unsafe and literally falling apart. In May 1916, for example, the brick chimney on the Pioneer School collapsed into one of the rooms, severely injuring three children. The desk of a child who was absent was demolished and no doubt if its usual occupant had been present, he would have been killed. Repairs and renovations were made in these old buildings, partly financed by a \$5,000 gift from the Du Pont Company. In June 1919 the city council appropriated \$20,000 to finance preliminary work for a new high school. State public education officials apparently were not impressed, however, notifying the city that the Walker building was entirely unsuited for use as a high school and that unless immediate steps were taken toward constructing a new building, the city would be denied financial aid amounting to about \$12,000 a year. The building, constructed in 1894 for 100 students, had been repeatedly remodeled to accommodate additional students, of which there were about 400 in the junior



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

and senior levels in the fall of 1919. The basement, hallways, and third floor were being used as classrooms, even though lighting, ventilation, space, sanitation, fire safety, and other factors were below state standards. The report of the state inspector was blunt and did not provide any opportunity for compromise: "the rooms now being used for high school purposes are entirely unfit . . . and are a menace to the life and health of the students, and many rooms must be abandoned. Remodeling is out of the question." This ultimatum from the state must have been somewhat of a surprise to the school board and city council since in 1916 and 1917 the high school program had been inspected and retained on the accredited list of the university. In November 1919 the school board and city council, still struggling with the problems of overcrowding

and unsafe buildings, even though the boom had collapsed, was suddenly confronted with another problem. All of the teachers in the school system signed a petition to the school board, requesting a salary increase of ten dollars a month because of the increased cost of living, threatening to strike unless their demand was met. The Times, usually a fierce critic of strikes, was surprisingly mild in its response, admitting that the teachers "have some reason for complaint and that a compromise of some kind should be effected." There was no compromise, however, the school board quickly, if reluctantly, granting the pay increase. High school graduates increased from 23 in 1915 to 44 in 1918, during the war, then dropped to 24 in 1919. A total of 155 seniors graduated during the five years from 1915 to 1919, with women constituting 72% of the graduates. In 1915, the prom was held at the old town hall, the Times reporting that "The hall was prettily decorated for the occasion in class colors, streamers of crepe paper being hung from the center of the room to the sides and the lights were also trimmed in class colors." A "fine . . . baccalaureate address" was delivered to the graduates by Reverend Christiansen at the Norwegian Lutheran Church. The senior class play, entitled "A College Town," was presented at the

opera house, the Times, noting that the "three act farce comedy . . . was well rendered by those taking part in the cast." Finally, commencement exercises were held at the opera house, the Times, reporting that they were "largely attended," with "The hall . . . prettily decorated with streamers of crepe paper and the background of the stage was a bank of flowers." High school students continued to participate in oratorical and declamatory competitions under the auspices of the Chequamegon Oratorical Association, with separate competitions for boys and girls. The preliminary contests for Washburn students were held in the Congregational Church. A typical preliminary contest program held in March 1916, began with instrumental and vocal solos, followed by orations entitled "Dedication of Bunker Hill Monument," "Patrick Henry's Liberty Speech," "Baker's Reply to Breckenridge," "The New South," and "Nomination of Blaine," concluding with a violin solo. The winners of the preliminary contests moved to the district level, the winners there went to the division level, while those who won at that level went to the state competitions. Washburn students occasionally won at the district level, advancing to the division level, but never won there to qualify to attend the state competitions.