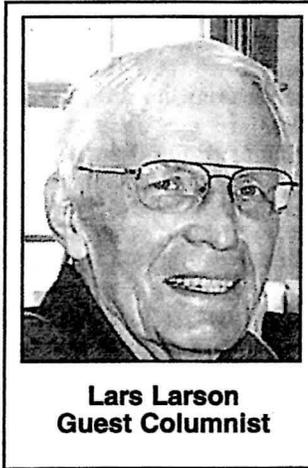


Educating Washburn's children, part four

CS 47/17

As in prior years the key education issues confronting the city and school officials during the decade of the 1920s were providing the classroom space and teachers required to accommodate grade and high school enrollments, and obtaining the financial resources to meet these two requirements. During the decade total grade and high school enrollments declined by 34% reflecting a 40% decrease in the population. While the decrease in enrollments reduced classroom and teacher expenses, the decline in the population resulted in reduced tax revenues, so the problem of financing the schools remained. In fact, the financial condition of the schools was so serious that the city defaulted on paying teachers salaries in 1920 and 1921. Several teachers, some of them practically destitute, sued the city because they had not been paid in months. As information about the financial condition of the Washburn school system circulated in the teaching profession, hiring and retaining teachers became difficult.

The two major problems of the school system—overcrowding, which continued despite the decrease in population, and a lack of financial resources—collided over the need to construct a high school building to replace the old Walker School. In January 1920, in response to an ultimatum from state education officials to replace the Walker



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School building or lose state aid, a committee of citizens recommended that the city change to a district school system, which would allow the school board to issue bonds to finance a new building. The voters rejected this proposal, however, and the state appears to have withdrawn state aid for vocational education.

By the end of the decade interest in constructing a new high school building had faded, perhaps due to the decline in enrollments and the persistent reality of no financial resources to do so. A new stage and more efficient heating plant were installed in the Walker building, however, and an athletic field constructed just south of it. There were also occasional references in the Times to repairs, renovations, redecorations, and "much work done" on the school buildings, but no reports about the extensive remodeling of the Walker building that would have made it acceptable to the

state public education authorities.

The Times occasionally published a column prepared by an editorial staff of students, entitled "In School," which included information about activities and events at the high school, along with musings about education and life in general that reflected the concerns and prejudices of the times. For example, the "In School" column for November 15 1923 discussed patriotism, its definition and importance throughout the nation's history, concluding by urging readers to ask themselves, "Am I loyal enough to my country—an I patriotic?" If found "wanting, remedy it quickly," and if "up to standard keep yourself there. . . . It is our duty to make our nation better than ever, Get busy." Another column on February 14 1924 reported on the celebration, at the high school, of Abraham Lincoln's birthday (February 12 1808). Civil War songs—including "Tenting Tonight" and "Battle Cry of Freedom"—were sung, followed by a talk by the superintendent of schools about Lincoln's "childhood and how he received his education," including "why his virtues should be emulated and be an inspiration to the modern school boys and girls." "The program was closed by singing the song, 'Old Black Joe.'"

Pupils from all grades displayed their talents in carnivals, plays, operettas, and other performances, and

annually, from 1926 to 1929, in a "May day fete." This festival, consisting of songs, dances, and other exercises performed by children from the first to sixth grades, was held the latter part of May on the court house lawn or at Memorial Park. In 1927, for example, the festival took place on the court house lawn, and included folk dances, a "Ribbon Dance," a "Ring Drill," a "Bubble Dance," a "Flower Drill," a "Minuet," and several song selections, concluding with a "May Pole Dance." The Times commented that the festival "was an outstanding success from every viewpoint except that of the weather."

A total of 401 students graduated from 1920 to 1929, with women outnumbering men 240 to 161 (1925 was an anomaly with 20 men and 12 women graduates). As in prior years, high school graduation, with its rituals of class day, baccalaureate service, class play and prom, and the pageant of commencement, marking the passage of another group of young people into adulthood, was a major community event. In May 1926 the baccalaureate service was held at the Congregational Church; the class play, "Polly With A Pass," which the Times declared a "big hit," was presented at the Rex Theatre; the prom was held at the Du Pont club; and class day exercises and commencement at the Rex Theatre.