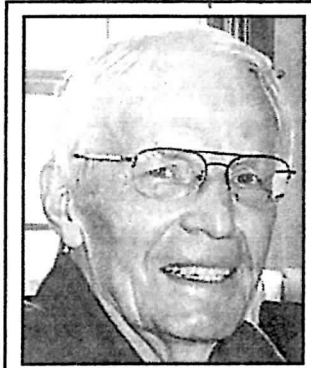


Washburn Community Affairs — Education part 2

CS 11/10/11

The annual celebrations of high school graduation continued throughout the decade, even during the war, with the traditional sequence of junior-senior prom and banquet, baccalaureate service, class day, and commencement. The 1945 graduation was a special event, the golden jubilee of the first graduation class. Four of the six members of the class of 1895 attended and were honored at a banquet and the commencement ceremony: Susan Lathrop, Petra Ellingson Bestler, Laura Irish Jones, and Stephen A. Oscar, who was the class valedictorian (the other members of the class were Elizabeth Lathrop and Margaret Sweet Hull). Oscar, president of the National Mutual Benefit Insurance Company, delivered the commencement address on "Making Life A Success—Commencement Thoughts On Learning To Live." From 1940 to 1950 there were 369 graduates, including 181 males and 188 females. Males would probably have outnumbered females, but during the war years many of the men went into the services before graduation.

In early October 1940, apparently in response to the critical findings of the State Department of Public Instruction inspectors, the council decided to borrow money for "making necessary repairs and reconditioning the Walker High School," as a WPA project. The project was approved,



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with the city as sponsor, providing \$10,000 of the \$30,000 total cost. Work began in late January 1941, while classes continued in the building. But there were no real improvements in the building, only renovation and updating of the structure to meet, as far as possible, the state standards for school construction. So the old dilemma continued—there was not enough money to construct a building to replace Walker High School, while the little money that was available had to be spent trying to save the white elephant from the graveyard.

Fate finally took a hand when, on Wednesday, February 5, 1947, Walker High School was destroyed by fire. The fire began on the roof about noon, when all but a few students and teachers were away for lunch. The Washburn volunteer fire department arrived promptly with its antique truck but could do nothing because water from the hoses did not

reach the fire on the upper floors due to insufficient pressure. The Ashland fire department sent a pumper, but by the time it arrived the fire was out of control and could not be contained. The Times published an excellent description of the fire, which with some understatement it termed a "spectacular blaze":

"The interior of the 53 year old building was built of pine framing, with hardwood floors and woodwork, that had been seasoning for over half a century, and was as dry as tinder. Floor oil that had soaked into the flooring through the years made the interior still more inflammable. The high wind and the open stairways and halls provided a tremendous draft which was increased as the heat and gas within exploded through the windows. As the fire progressed, the building became a huge stone furnace filled with blazing kindling. The flames roared up through the top and out of the windows like giant blowtorches. Huge clouds of black smoke were carried by the wind over the east half of the city and dropped large pieces of charcoal blocks away. Floors and stairs burned through and crashed down on the floors and stairs beneath, finally coming to rest as smoldering rubble in the basement. The west half of the belfry and the third-story stone gable on the east side near the southwest corner crum-

bled from the intense heat and loss of bracing and tumbled into the flaming, smoking ruins. Later the southeast corner and the nearby gable on the south side collapsed. The large square ventilating chimney in the center of the structure stood firmly through the inferno."

A climax of sorts came as the windows blew out with a tremendous "boom" that could be heard in Ashland and Bayfield. Shortly afterwards the interior collapsed into a pyre in the basement, within the cauldron of the great brownstone walls, from which enormous flames billowed high into the sky. That night the smoldering heap of rubble in the basement cast a flickering glow on the sandstone walls, standing like some great Neolithic monument.

The city arranged with the Du Pont Company for the use of the Du Pont club building as a temporary high school. New text books were ordered, and through the hard work of administrators, teachers, and others, school opened on the Monday following the fire. With money from insurance, contributions by the people of Washburn, and \$30,000 from the Du Pont Company, a new high school was constructed adjacent to the elementary school. Classes began in the new building on May 1, 1950, with the formal dedication on July 28.