When My Family Moved to School, I Didn’t Know How Much I Would Learn by Stan Langhofer

It was October of 1995 and I had just moved my family into what previously had been “West Union School”. The country school in western Shawnee County had been closed since 1956 and any one room school artifacts had long since been removed but there was no doubt that this was a school. The stone structure sat high upon a hill where the ringing bell in the bell tower used to be heard for miles around as children hurried to class. Each side of the school was lined with huge windows to allow as much outside light in as possible. A chimney gave evidence of the pot belly stove that used to warm the students during the winter months. An outhouse still stood in back with 3 doors. One for boys, one for girls and one for coal. The open field to the south was the perfect baseball field and the huge sycamore tree to the north was the play ground equipment. The stone above the front door said 1887 indicating when the first children had crossed its threshold.

The Langhofer family gradually settled into our school home in the country. Moving out of town into a limestone home had been a dream of ours for many years. My family is from Russell County where majestic limestone structures still spot the landscape and now we lived in one, a dream come true. My wife Theresa and I began raising our two young children and making needed repairs on the property. As you know that is a very busy season of life and I had very little extra time to learn about the school’s history, but I always kind of wondered.

As time went on I remembered wishing the walls could talk and tell the schools story, and they began to. Well, not actually the walls but a few former students started stopping by to see the old school and show their children and grand children where they had started their education. They were full of stories and we listened and smiled and I fell in love with Kansas one room school history. They told me of other students still living in the area and I started calling, writing and visiting with them as well. At first I just listened then I began writing and finally video taping their stories. I have many.

John Miller still lives in the community just a couple of miles from our school. He attended West Union School from 1918-1926 graduating from the 8th grade and going onto High School in Rossville. His 1st grade teacher was Doris Edwards, now that’s a memory. He mostly remembers recess especially baseball, Annie over the outhouse and shiny (as he pronounces it), a hockey like game with sticks and crushed tin cans. “It’s amazing we never got hurt” he says. John remember riding to school on a horse and cart with his brother and sister and putting his horse in the 6 stall barn that used to be out back before a fire destroyed it. He remembers using the glass ink wells to burn his initials into the desk. The pot belly stove served to cover up the wood burning smoke smell. As he approaches his 93rd birthday he still remembers his father Bert telling him about one of his own experiences at West Union School. His dad told him about a school teacher he had around the turn of the century that shot his revolver into the black board to get the unruly classes attention. “It worked” he said. I bet it did.

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Topeka City Council Approved Transfer of Land to SCHS…
The city council recently approved the transfer of two city lots neighboring on the project site on Madison to the Shawnee County Historical Society. This adds important ground to the site for Ritchie House program development. The Shawnee County Historical Society greatly appreciates the efforts of Mayor James McClinton.

Building a Community…
John was an astute businessman and he began a lime quarry and kiln operation, constructing commercial buildings, and reserving land for a college which would ultimately become Washburn University.

Described as “a little apt to go off half-cocked” and “rather rough in appearance” by his contemporaries, he was an intelligent, tough man of Scot-Irish blood who had a solid head for business. (Ritchie-Shelledy Family History)

Kansas Avenue in Bloom…
In November 1856, Topeka could count 80 new buildings. One of these was the Ritchie Block. It was the first brick block in the town, a 3-story, 70 by 100-foot building owned by Ritchie, Walter Oakley and L. C. Wilmarth. Its auditorium, called The Museum, was soon the site of festivals, dances and meetings. Here, in April 1857, the first public play was presented, The Drunkard. When fire destroyed the Ritchie Block on November 28, 1869 the loss was estimated at $50,000 to $75,000 with the State of Kansas and Crane’s Bindery being the big losers.

The Ritchie Block was on the southeast corner of Sixth and Kansas. It was the home of the Kansas state executive offices and state senate. (Ritchie-Shelledy Family History)

Washburn University…
In 1866, John Ritchie gave the three lots on the corner of Tenth and Jackson Streets for the preparatory school, and $1000 in cash toward its construction. Ritchie also contributed the 160 acres that became the permanent campus.

The building that was home to the preparatory school was sold and the building became Jackson grade school when Washburn moved to its present site. (Ritchie-Shelledy Family History)

Upcoming Shawnee County Historical Society Meeting…
The Shawnee County Historical Society will be having a meeting on May 4th at 7:00 p.m. The meeting will be held at the I.O.O.F. The meeting will include presentations on the following:
- The First Constitutional Hall in Topeka, presented by Bob Johnson
- The Overland Station, presented by Bob St. John
- Preservation Awards, presented by Doug Jones
- Ritchie House, presented by Rick Friedstrom
- Presentation of “Mahala Doyle, a survivor of the Pottawatomie Creek Massacre of May 24/25th,” presented by Michelle Martin
Please print and fill out this form, then send, with payment, to the address below.

NOTE: The Shawnee County Historical Society and Historic Topeka have merged. We are called “Shawnee County Historical Society,” but now include historic preservation focus as well as documenting local history.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Membership is from January-December, annually.

Yes! I wish to join the Society that preserves the past and celebrates our heritage.

Name ________________________________________________________________

Address ____________________________ Phone # ____________________________

City ________________________________ E-Mail ______________________________

State ______________________________ Zip ________________

Check type of membership: _____Regular - $25.00 _____Friend - $35.00

_____Patron - $50.00 _____Renovator - $100.00

VOLUNTEER FOR A COMMITTEE

I WISH TO JOIN THE FOLLOWING COMMITTEE:

[ ] Nominations Committee [ ] Membership Committee [ ] Publications Committee

[ ] Annual Meeting/Socials Committee [ ] Preservation Committee

[ ] Ritchie Project Committee [ ] Ross Row House Committee [ ] Public Relations Committee

NAME (please print) _________________________________________________________

GIFT MEMBERSHIP

$ Gift Membership for someone I know who will benefit from membership.

(Photocopy this form if more than one)

NAME ________________________________________________________________

Address ______________________________________________________________

City ________________________________________________________________

State ____________________________ Zip ________________

(Make checks to “Shawnee County Historical Society”)

Please send form(s) with your check to:

Shawnee County Historical Society
P.O. Box 2201, Topeka, KS 66601-2201
His older sister Roby Hatch still lives in Kansas City and she graduated in 1925. She loved the spelling bees which were a regular feature in the classroom. The teacher would divide up the students into two sides and the competition would begin. When lunch time came around she remembered playing hide and seek in the pasture that surrounded the school. Ruby still cherishes getting two perfect attendance certificates, a special honor in those days.

Clinton Sherrets graduated a few years later in 1928. Some of the best times of his life were his days at “ole #58” as he called West Union referring to the district number. He remembers it as a good school but that his grades weren’t so good “because I fell in love with my Model T instead of books” he admits.

He ended up making a living as a mechanic, imagine that. Clinton remembers a mouse on the window ledge inside the school that he killed to protect their lunches that were warming in the sun. He did it by throwing his pocket knife and pinning the mouse to the wood. He told me he was the hero of the day and couldn’t do it again in a hundred years. Knifes were a normal item in a boys pocket back then, “not today” he notes. Clinton remembers the day beginning with prayer and the pledge of allegiance. School went from 9:00AM till 4:00PM eight months a year and West Union had as many as 48 students at one time. Imagine that. His smile is always big but when he tells me about the trick horseback riding they did during recess it gets even bigger, until the teacher put an end to it.

His best friend in school was Vesta McKenzie who attended West Union School from 1919 until 1926. Clinton said, “She wasn’t a girl she was my buddy”. When I visited her in a Rossville nursing home she lit up when I mentioned Clinton’s name, even after all these months a year and West Union had as many as 48 students at one time. Imagine that. His smile is always big but when he tells me about the trick horseback riding they did during recess it gets even bigger, until the teacher put an end to it.

Vesta was “hungry to learn” and she remembers her last teacher was Arthur Randall, one of the few male country school teachers in those days. When her family moved to Kentucky after 7th grade she was so far ahead they moved her up to the 9th grade. She’s very proud of that. Vesta does remember some boys dipping girl’s hair into the ink wells, “but it never happened to me” she says proudly. In class you could hear a pin drop, nobody got up or said a word without permission. Vesta and her Extension club are even responsible for lobbying to change the name of the road the school is on to “West Union Road”, of course.

The Fitzerald family provided the land for West Union School and all attended it. Calvin gave me some great pictures, the only ones I’ve been able to locate, of the students standing outside along the stone. In one of them you can even see the three wise men Christmas decorations in the window. He grew up just over the hill and the family still owns the land all around the school. Calvin has a picture of his class on a field trip…to the field. So that’s where that expression came from.

Barbara Hesse’s brother in law Bill remembers delivering coal to the school from his Dad’s lumber yard in Rossville. “I hand delivering the ticket into the teacher because I thought she was pretty, but she didn’t pay any attention to me” he said with a smile.

Laverne Hoffman (her maiden name was Adkins) graduated in 1945 but remembers as a young girl how afraid she was of the snakes she would see on the way to the out house. “They were little but there were lots of them”, she said. The last day of school was a big day she recalls, the men didn’t even work in the fields. Everyone came together for a big picnic and a fun time.

Helen Viergiver still volunteers in the Rossville library. She graduated from West Union in 1949 and brought me her Diploma to prove it. Her father, Andy, served as one of the three school board members for years and years. Their home place is just south of the school. We could even go home for lunch some days she said. Louis Wetlaufer was her 8th grade teacher and she is still living in the Chicago area. I have a letter from her and hope I get to meet her. She is the last surviving teacher. Walter Cormack, who taught in the late 20’s died in 2002 before I had a chance to meet him. I still regret that. Don’t let history slip away from you as it serves an important role in our life.

I do have many more stories but I think you get the idea. One room school history holds a very special place in my heart. In 1912 there were almost 100 rural country school houses in Shawnee County but by the late 50’s they were mostly gone. Their memory, however lives on, just ask around, but only if you have the time to listen.

Call For Articles - As you have noticed by now, the first article submitted by a member is published in this issue. Hopefully this will encourage and inspire others to submits articles of interest concerning the history of Shawnee County. Don’t be bashful, folks. It doesn’t have to be too long. The potential topics are many. As these articles come in, as many as possible will be published in the newsletter and all will be published on our website and archived there for future readers.
SCHS Historic Preservation Awards Ceremony

On May 4, 2005, the Shawnee County Historical Society held a Historic Preservation Awards Ceremony at the 6th Avenue Ballroom (the old IOOF building) at 117-119 SW 6th Street. The program for the evening was as follows:

- Presentation about Constitution Hall by Robert Johnson
- Presentation about the Great Overland Station by Bob St. John
- Portrayal of Mahala Doyle (survivor of the Pottawatomie Creek Massacre) by Michelle Martin
- Presentation about the Ritchie House Project by Rick Friedstrom
- Historic Preservation Awards were given to North Topeka On The Move (NOTOMA) for their publication of the “Garfield Gazette” - Award accepted by Scott Beck
- Mark and Sarah Burenheide for their preservation projects in Downtown Topeka and Holiday Park
- Michael Fox for preservation projects in Downtown Topeka
- The Great Overland Station (award accepted by Max Prosser)
- Brown v. Board National Historic Site (award accepted by Superintendent Dennis Vasquez)
- Robert Johnson received a Lifetime Preservation Award for his decades of efforts in numerous historical preservation projects

The evening was well attended, and thanks to the efforts of Betty Paxson and Betty Bomar, the refreshments were enjoyed by all. This will be an annual event in conjunction with National Preservation Week.

Endangered Structures of Shawnee County

The Newsletter and the Website will be featuring structures in Shawnee County that are deemed to be historically or architecturally of merit that are considered to be in jeopardy. We encourage everyone to become familiar with these structures and support their restoration/rehabilitation. Others will be added to the list as we become aware of them.

Constitution Hall - 427 - 429 Kansas Ave. • 725 - 727 Kansas Avenue

Menninger Tower Building • Hicksblocks Apartments

Topeka State Hospital Tower Building • 900 Block of S. Kansas Avenue (east side of street)

Original Menninger Clinic • Victorian House used by KDHR at 427 SW Topeka Blvd.

112 - 118 SE 7th St. • Sumner School

Jayhawk Theatre - 714 Jackson • East Topeka Jr. High School

Dillon House - 404 SW 9th St. • Legislators Stables - 700 block of Jackson

Landon Building - 900 Jackson • Thomas Arch Bridge - located just south of Auburn on Auburn Rd.
Aaron Douglas Memorial Mural

On Monday, May 23, 2005, the dedication of the Mural in honor of Topeka Artist, Aaron Douglas, took place near 12th and Lane. Aaron Douglas is an important figure in local and national history and was best known for his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance (an important artistic era in our national history). The Mural is magnificent. It’s creation was guided by lead muralist, David Lowenstein, and consulting artist, Stan Herd. Also involved were numerous artists from local high schools. The land for the mural was donated by Dillons, Inc. The project was developed by the Topeka Turnaround Team who raised the funds necessary to create the mural. David Leamon was the Chair of the committee that spearheaded this effort. This area is also Topeka’s newest park, the Aaron Douglas Art Park. Stop by and take a look. You’ll be glad you did.