

RIVERTON SCHOOL HISTORY

BY

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The Riverton school system exists today as a result of 124 years of community interest and involvement in education. It is necessary to examine the origins of the community in order to appreciate the development of the educational system into what presently exists today.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened Kansas territories to settlement by the white man. In southeast Kansas (Cherokee county) a buffer zone had been established to prevent white encroachment on Indian territories to the south. "The Cherokee Neutral lands lay in a strip twenty-five miles east and west between the boundary of Missouri and the eastern boundary of the Osage territory...the tract extended fifty miles north of the northern boundary of the Cherokee reservation." (Durland 1937,8).

The Neutral lands officially opened for settlement to the white man in 1868. Even though the lands were not officially opened until 1868 many white settlers occupied the land prior to opening. After its official opening, the Federal Government sold land directly to the settlers and speculators from the east who would later use the land for railroad development. Access to the territories came from Missouri and the Military Road that connected Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and Fort Gibson, Oklahoma. The Military Road remains the current U.S. 69 and 69 alternate. At that juncture of U.S. 69 and the former U.S. 66, the community of Riverton developed.

To the south of Riverton, where Spring River and Shoal Creek converged, the earliest settlement in Cherokee County was located. Lowell became a thriving community in the 1860's. Some settlement in the area of Lowell had occurred prior to the Civil War. By the time the first Quakers arrived to settle in Quaker Valley to the north, a thriving Lowell boasted flour mills, tin shops, wagon shops, lime kilns, pottery, grocery and blacksmith shops, a civil engineer, a Justice of the Peace and a doctor. "...the school overlooking the convergence of Shoal Creek and Spring River.",(Durland 1937, 22) had been built prior to the Civil War. The school was "In 1868 only one teacher and one room with homemade sets and desks for fifty of sixty students..."(Durland 1937, 22). The subjects taught were reading, writing, grammar, bookkeeping, algebra and others.(Durland 1937, 23). This school was ungraded and each year the student would start at the beginning of the book and work to the end. Sometimes they would go through the same book year after year. Eventually this school would become Cherokee County School District #3.

In Quaker Valley, most of the Quaker settlers arrived near the end of the 1869's and early 1870's. Some came from the eastern part of the United States, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Appalachian mountains. Others came from northern Kansas. The Quakers' reputation as builders proved to be true. Shortly after their arrival in the Neutral lands they constructed cabins for homes and a "log meeting house"(Cornerstone records 1928), for church and school. A school district, Cherokee County School District #5, was formed in this community in 1867. By 1880 they constructed a permanent school one half

mile west of present day Riverton on property purchased from John Hodson. “ The first teacher was a man from the South who was not too well equipped to teach...”(Stewart 1976).

Attendance at the Lowell school fluctuated in the years 1868-1926. Some years the attendance dropped to thirty pupils and in other years it climbed to over one hundred. By 1908 or 1909 a graded system had been implemented and two teachers worked there. Lowell passed bonds and constructed a new school in 1922-23 with 81 pupils enrolled in all eight grades. Lowell received a “Standard” rating in 1926.

In Quaker Valley, the Mitchell #5 school had a term of six to eight months. Teachers received a salary of about thirty-three dollars a month during that time. In 1914 additions to the Mitchell #5 school became necessary due to the increase in school population. By 1922 the increased population forced another building project to be undertaken. Four new classrooms, at a new location to the southeast of the old Mitchell #5, made up the school.

The Society of Friends did not neglect higher education. Part of their religious belief stressed the need for a good education. The Stone Quaker Academy and the Academy in Lowell fulfilled those needs.

The Stone Quaker Academy served as a church meeting place, a dorm for students, and a school. Teachers for the academy had to be members of the Friends Society. Construction for the Stone Quaker Academy took place in the late 1870's. The school survived until 1915. It could not compete with the free public education. During its operation the academy had grades, intermediate, and academic levels of instruction. The academic level compared to the high school rank. Their courses consisted of: English, literature, Latin, history, constitution, physical geography, astronomy, algebra, geometry, surveying, botany, physiology, and other subjects.(Durland 1937, 38).

The Academy in Lowell opened in 1893 on land that had been purchased for the purpose of building the “Lowell Polytechnic Institute” (Durland 1937, 39). Quaker interest in Lowell didn't develop until the 1870's when several Quaker families moved there because of inter-church differences. But their influence and interest helped to build the Lowell Polytechnic Institute. This academy had a rigorous three year curriculum consisting of: English, algebra, ancient history, Latin, plane and solid geometry, physical geography, physiology, astronomy, chemistry, botany, American and modern history, and psychology. This institute opened in 1893 and closed in 1897. It could not compete with public education.(Durland 1937, 42).

Other factors besides the Quakers had considerable influence on the development of the Riverton school system. In the early development of Cherokee Country, the railroad crossed the county from north to south and east to west. The Frisco railroad ran from Joplin to Galena and on to Baxter Springs. Between Galena and Baxter Springs a post office located near the tracks gave the community, it's name of Varck. Early county school records refer to Cherokee County School District #5 as Varck. The Railroad

brought some tax base to the community but the real boost to the Riverton(Varck) community didn't come until 1906-07 when the electric power company plant constructed its facilities on Spring River.

Many of the local people helped in the construction of the power plant. Other laborers moved into the area creating a larger population for the school. During that period the Mitchell #5 school was enlarged and would eventually be moved to the present site of the Riverton school. During the construction of the power plant, suggestions were made to change the name of the community. As a consequence, the name changed from Varck to Riverton, and when the school relocated, its name changed from Mitchell #5 to Riverton.

Several factors emerged during this period that favored the forming of a local high school in the Riverton area. The community did not have any higher education facility available to their children after Stone Academy and the Polytechnic Institutes closed. If the Riverton community students desired to continue their education they had to attend the Galena, Baxter Springs, or the Cherokee County Community high schools. (Potter 1991). Because of the distances students had to travel to school, many had to board in the area where they attended school. This created considerable inconveniences and eliminated many from attending high school. A local push developed to form a high school in the Riverton area. As a direct result of the building the power plant a tax base had been established and many of the local people wanted the taxes to remain in the community to support a new high school.(Potter 1991). Many of the supporters of this idea worked for Empire and had children in the Riverton grade school.

Riverton's status as an unincorporated town prohibited the passing of bonds to build a new school. This did not deter the decision to form a high school at Riverton. In the fall of 1923 the first class of high school began in the same building that housed the grade school. The four room school housed the eighth grade level and the ninth grade for the high school. Eventually Kansas changed the law that prohibited unincorporated communities from passing bond issues and the Riverton community elected to build a new high school. Finally in 1928 the new building housed the Riverton high school students. Before the building's completion, the students used the grade school facilities with each additional year after 1923-24 a new grade level had to be added. In 1923-24 freshman classes began: 1924-25 sophomore classes, 1925-26 the junior class, 1926-1927 the senior class. 1927 became the first year for a graduating class of Riverton high school. The class consisted of five girls. Four people made up the staff of the high school, two teachers, a principal, and a superintendent. The curriculum in 1927 consisted of: English, physics, elementary science, agriculture, civics, American history, algebra, geometry, bookkeeping, shorthand, manual training, sewing, cooking.(Cherokee County 1927)

“People in the area supported the idea of a high school and returned to send their children to school in Riverton.” (Potter 1991) By the end of the 1920's Riverton High School did serve the need of the Lowell and Riverton community for advanced education. Many of the graduates of the outlying grade school districts had the option of attending

Riverton High School or Cherokee County Community High School at Columbus. Most of the nearby students elected to attend Riverton.

In 1928 the superintendent of schools, Ira Welker, who followed M.A. Nations and John Wilson at that position, began the process of enlarging the district of Riverton High School (Potter 1991). This feat would finally be accomplished 34 years later. Regardless of the fact that most outlying districts sent their high school students to Riverton, most wanted to keep their grade schools. This put off the enlargement of the entire Riverton school system for sometime. County grade schools dotted the country side, one school for every four square mile. Several such districts surrounded the Riverton school district. Most of these schools had little economic basis for the support of advanced education, other than agriculture. This placed Riverton as a natural site for advanced education. Beginning in 1947 and continuing until 1962, the absorption of the rural grade districts continued. Oak Hill #7, Black Jack #4, and Lostine #9, came into the district in 1947, followed by Pleasant View #100, and Clem #16 in 1949, Elm Tree #57, Tennessee Prairie #51, Brush Creek #8 in 1950, Red Star #52 in 1952, Lowell #3 in 1957, and Checo #28 in 1962 (Cherokee County).

Whether intentional or just a twist of fate, the Lowell community resisted consolidation almost to the very end. Obviously both communities had great pride in their educational systems and strived to keep them in tact. Riverton's success must be attributed to the economic success it had enjoyed after the building of the electric power plant. During that time the economic base had eroded in the Lowell community. The importance of both communities' contributions to education in this area cannot be over-stated.

The final act of reorganization occurred in 1965 when Riverton District #5 became Unified School District #404 encompassing 60 square miles (North Central Evaluation 1976). During the years of consolidation, Leo Sandburn and Gerald Barkley held the positions of superintendent. Due to the consolidation, building programs became necessary to accommodate the influx of new students. The building programs began in 1951 with the addition of classrooms and continued in 1955 with more classrooms and an all-purpose room being added. In 1957 the district added a vocational agriculture building and in 1959 a gymnasium/auditorium. In 1963 construction of the auto mechanics building took place.

By 1978 the enrollment in the Riverton school system topped 750 in all 12 grades. The original building, the grade school and high school, could no longer accommodate the needs of the school, even though both buildings had been kept in excellent repair. The community supported the leadership of the superintendent, Sterling Woodrum, and passed a bond issue in 1978 for a new school complex. To do so, an era had to come to an end; both of the old buildings had to be razed.

By 1980 the multi-million dollar complex housed all of the students at Riverton under one roof. In 1991, the need for additional classrooms became apparent and superintendent, Bill Sweeten, supported by the board of education, decided to build again. Increased numbers of elementary students forced the action to reduce class size. Currently, three classes of each grade exist from Kindergarten to the eighth grade. In the Jr. High, subject matter is English, math, science, social science, music, physical education, and vocational classes. In the high school a diversified curriculum offers more than 92 subjects to students.

From the quaint school of 124 years ago to the modern complex that now exists, the importance of education has always been stressed. The present community supports educational endeavors just as strongly as the founding fathers. Riverton's heritage has played an important role in shaping the attitudes toward education in this community.

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