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The Glory That Was Port

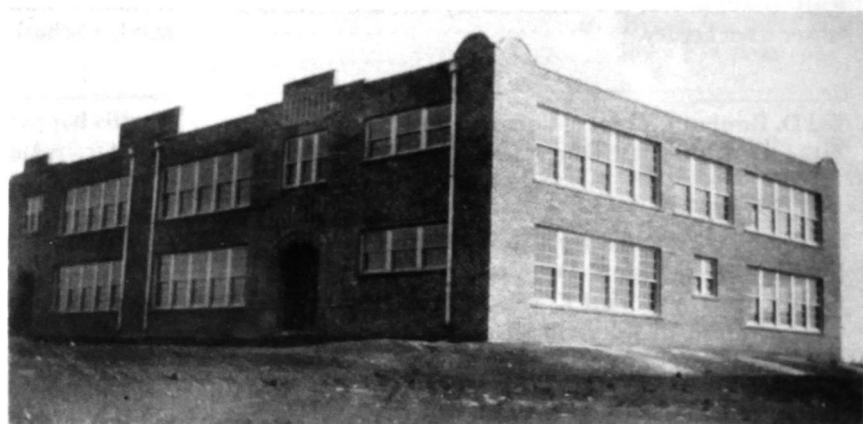
By Donita Lucas Shields

As soon as homesteaders staked their quarter-section claims in Oklahoma Territory after the Cheyenne-Arapaho Land Run, they started building their homes and schools. By the time the 1892-1893 winter school term began, 31 districts had been organized in County "H" (Washita County). The first schools were established along the fertile lowlands of Big Elk Creek: Barton (Sentinel) District #1, Combs District #2, and Wood (Port) District #3.

At first, there were two Woods--East Wood and West Wood, which developed one mile apart. Rivalry broke out when West Wood became the official post office. East Wood residents stole the post office at gunpoint and hauled it to their settlement. East Wood also wanted the school and actually started one in a dugout home, but West Wood folks didn't allow their children to attend. To settle the fracas, County "H" officials demanded that the post office be returned to West Wood and the school be situated halfway between the two rivals.

The Wood School dugout was constructed in the southeast corner of Section 34, Township 8, Range 20. Its district included 10.25 square miles, the nucleus of what would become the largest consolidated school in Oklahoma and possibly in the nation. Mr. Albert Peachy promoted construction, and he and Mr. Nick Bowie were the first teachers. Fewer than 25 children attended the brief winter terms. These children belonged to the community's first pioneers: James Wood, T. J. Hampton, Hugh Misenhimer, T. L. Lucas, A. L. Maddox, Nick Bowie, and R. E. Smith.

In 1902, both the school and the post office were named Port, honoring Andrew J. Port, the first postmaster. East Wood faded away, but the town of Port retained its post office until 1940. The dugout school was abandoned in 1902, and a frame three-room structure was built in Section 3, Township 8, Range 20 on the south side of the road east of Port Cemetery. In 1902-1903, 75 local children enrolled in primary, intermediate, and advanced classes.



Probably the best-remembered teacher was Mr. George A. Coffey, father of John Coffey, who later became president of Cameron University in Lawton. Mr. Coffey began his teaching career in 1901 at the nearby school of Hog Eye (Taylor District #89). He became widely known for his fine educational ideals and for organizing the district's first basketball team.

When settlers continued moving into Port Community to farm the rich, productive soil, the three-room school could no longer contain its increasing enrollment. During the summer of 1915, patrons took time out from their field work to tear down the old building and build another one before the fall term began. The two-story wooden building contained four classrooms downstairs and an auditorium on the second level. In the fall of 1915, the school enrolled 125 students.

Port School District #3 became Port Consolidated District #5 when West Spring Creek District #32 combined with it in 1921. Additional dissolves, consolidations, and annexations followed during the next three decades. These included the districts of Independence (#5), Portland (#65), Combs, Rock Front (#4), West Bethel (#63), Pleasant Grove (#93), Taylor, Herd Law (#33), Pink (#79), South Burns (#102), and Retrop (#66). Sentinel and

Port also exchanged portions of their districts. Before Port closed its doors in 1966, the district contained 88 square miles which included two districts in Kiowa County and a small area in Beckham County.

Anticipating the numerous mergings of surrounding one- and two-room schools, Port School District built its third facility in 1923, two miles east of its original schools, where it would be more centrally located. This two-story red-brick structure contained eleven classrooms and a combination auditorium-gymnasium--the school's first indoor basketball court. In 1926, Port became widely known not only for its powerful football, basketball, and track teams but also for being the largest and most modern consolidated school in Oklahoma.

Then in October, 1927, embarrassing headlines in THE SENTINEL LEADER reported, "Port School May Lose Credit Standing." The article stated that there were as many as 70 children in one classroom with one teacher. The state school inspector had previously recommended the need for more classrooms and additional teachers.

Not wanting the expense of building more classrooms, the Port Board of Education didn't heed the first warning from the State Department of Education. With danger of being stricken from the



First trucks and drivers for Port School, 1922 - 23

state's accredited list, the Board immediately called for an election to vote an \$11,500 bond issue for a separate elementary building. Many patrons failed to vote, and the issue carried by a small majority (three affirmative votes). Nevertheless, the elementary building was completed, and additional teachers were hired before the beginning of the 1928-1929 term.

In addition to Port School's excellent school system, its administrative and teaching staff, and its student body, the Parents-Teachers Association played an active role in providing extra-curricular activities. According to a 1928 news item, Port PTA held a drive to pay off the indebtedness on new auditorium seats. Every family in the district donated one hen or a dozen eggs or one dollar in cash.

Port patrons and students were as receptive to a strong fine arts program as they were to athletic prowess. In 1929-1930, the Lyceum arts calendar contained three evenings of entertainment presented by the Redpath Horner Chautauqua circuit, one faculty production, and one operetta provided by the students. In addition to the Lyceum, Port took pride in its band and vocal groups, and in 1929 Mrs. Rosa Fields taught the first art classes.

Mr. S. P. "Puny" Blevins organized the first pep club with Roy Umbach serving as sponsor. Zelma Brack and Olin Wright were the first elected cheerleaders. Coach Blevins also developed the school's first wrestling team. During the 1929-1930 term, every boy in high school enrolled in Blevins'

athletic program--a first in the coach's career.

During 1930, Port School enrolled more than 600 students and held an average daily attendance of 585. At this time Mr. J. W. Ensey served as superintendent with assistance from Principal W. W. French. There were nine elementary and six high-school teachers. The school district built a modern brick home for the superintendent and his family. Several homes for its teachers were constructed later.

One of the biggest problems of any rural school was the transporting of its students. Port's difficulties were at times almost insurmountable. Spring deluges and thawing winter snows made bottomless quagmires with deep ruts and dangerous bar ditches. Big Elk, Trail Elk, and Spring Creek and their numerous tributaries traversed the entire district. Their rampaging flood waters often wiped out roads and bridges. (hence the old community expression, "We'll be there if Big Elk don't rise")

At one time there were seventeen "trucks" to pick up nearly 700 students in the morning and return them to their homes in the evening. Students sat on overcrowded narrow board seats, and the routes were long. The trucks became deep freezers in the winter and ovens during the summer terms. (School started in late July or early August so students could have "Cotton Pickin' Vacations" to help with cotton harvest during September, October, and November.)

Mr. Kirk Farris, transportation

supervisor, designed and constructed peculiar-looking round bodies for the school's trucks. Mr. Farris was also in charge of drivers and maintenance. He chose his drivers carefully--high-school boys who were levelheaded and responsible.

Drivers received a \$20 monthly salary, and Farris placed them on an honor and competitive system. At the end of designated periods after he evaluated both their driving and school behavior, Mr. Farris gave monetary awards to the best all-around Ford and Chevrolet drivers.

Kirk Farris was a strict supervisor who fired speeding drivers. Fast and reckless driving endangered lives on the treacherous roads and bridges and caused mechanical and maintenance problems. (Back then, the federal speed limit was 45 mph, but in 1927 Oklahoma's 11th Legislature set the state's limit at 35 mph. Even this speed was too fast for the district's narrow, rough roads.)

When Mr. Coffey returned to Port as superintendent in 1931, he chose Jess M. Welch, his son-in-law, to serve as principal. Mr. Welch held this position for two years and became superintendent in 1933, the office he held for 18 consecutive years. Being trained by his father-in-law and holding similar educational standards, J. M. Welch developed a school program that was second to none. One of his innovative ideas concerned the development of Senior Class trips.

As a modern educator, Mr. Welch realized the importance of visual edu-



Senior Trip 1939

cation and learning by doing. In his own words, "Why not teach students to plan and to do, to earn and to budget? Wouldn't a definite goal, an attractive one, keep students' minds on accomplishments and prevent lapses ending in disciplinary trips to the office?" (from "Seniors Return from 4500-mile Tour," by Ida V. Robertson, *THE SENTINEL LEADER*, July 6, 1939.)

The Class of 1936 was the first group to spread its wings after graduation on a school bus tour to Carlsbad Caverns. The week-long holiday proved to be a success, and the Port senior trip tradition was born. The school's travel program evolved into a lengthier project when the Class of 1939 became the first to attempt a cross-country "Washington or Bust."

In order to raise the necessary \$900 for their trip, students sold newspaper and magazine subscriptions, pulled cotton, and held benefit shows and carnivals. They sponsored annual class plays, basketball tournaments, and auction sales. Students planned their itinerary by writing letters to Chamber of Commerce organizations, State Parks, and Tourism Bureaus in cities in twenty states. Before leaving the school campus, they made campsite reservations for every night. Each student budgeted himself \$15. for personal expenses.

For twenty-five days, twenty-five seniors, nine teachers and a twelve-year-old boy, five parents, one driver, and one mechanic lived in two buses and four tents while traveling across the nation. In addition to a comprehensive tour of Washington, D.C., other highlights of their vacation included deep-sea fishing near Breille, New Jersey, New York City, the World's Fair, the Canadian Niagara Falls, and a tour of the Ford plant in Detroit.

Mr. Welch and eight boys rode in the lead truck containing luggage, U.S. Army tents, cots, bedrolls, cooking utensils and dishes, and other camping gear. The remaining thirty-two members of the group rode in the second bus, driven by Mr. Raymond Farris, the school mechanic. They sat on four board benches running the length of the bus. To have equal time for scenic viewing, the group rotated frequently from inside to outside seats.

The Class of 1940 altered its "Washington or Bust" trip and took a 24-day, 4,000-mile tour through Texas and the Southern states. The group also eliminated much of the heavy camping equipment which consumed so much space and had taken so much time to load and unload in 1939. Special highlights of the 1940 tour included deep-sea fishing in Galveston, a historical tour of the Deep South, Stone Mountain, Georgia, Endless Caverns and Natural Bridge, Virginia, and Lookout Mountain, Tennessee.

One of the biggest thrills of the 1940 trip was Mr. Welch's new movie camera. He made an educational color movie beginning with the group's preliminary activities and ending with the final unloading at the end of the trail. He later showed the film to all Washita County schools. (The movie continues to be a vital part of Port Reunions that are held in Sentinel every five years.)

When the Class of 1940 returned to Port campus, the sad occasion brought tears to the eyes of everyone. At the time the group left on May 29, crews were in the process of tearing down the school's two brick buildings. When they returned on June 21, nothing remained but stacks of salvaged bricks and piles of rubble.

Port's enrollment had again outgrown the available classrooms. This time,

the district overwhelmingly approved a \$23,000 bond to construct a larger facility. This funding was added to a \$52,000 Work Projects Administration grant and the \$15,000 salvage evaluation of the two old buildings. The Board of Education, which included Jim Corcorran, Allan Dawson, Allen Harper, and Mr. Welch, designed a native limestone, 74,520-square-foot, "U"-shaped structure that became the largest school plant in Western Oklahoma.

In order to have temporary classrooms as well as to provide a permanent storm facility, construction crews completed a \$19,512 WPA project, containing a storm shelter beneath a full-sized tennis court, before school started. This underground area was divided into four classrooms. The bus maintenance building provided another classroom, and band classes were held in the bus barn. The boys' basketball team practiced on the tennis court and played all games on opponents' courts until completion of the gymnasium. The girls didn't have an organized team in 1940-1941.

Since the school cafeteria wasn't finished that term, student workers prepared hot soup in a partially completed room in the new building. Workers carried the meal in huge covered cans and ladled out soup to pupils in the cellar and elementary classrooms. Others delivered the bowls, spoons, and crackers. After lunch, they took everything back to the temporary kitchen for washing, drying, and storing.

Of course, some students carried lunches from home. Others, especially high-school boys, preferred eating hamburgers at a nearby country store on the campus. Mr. Marvin Bowie, the rural mail carrier, delivered three or four pounds of freshly ground meat each morning from a grocery store in Sentinel. Mr. Horace Williams, proprietor of the store, made three or four dozen hamburgers, which were purchased by the boys who ran fastest. When those burgers were gone, there were none to purchase by the less fleet of foot.

During that year in the cellar, rural electricity was in its infancy, and outages were commonplace. Instead of practicing fire and storm drills, a student learned to evacuate a pitch-dark classroom by placing his hand on a shoulder in front of him and shuffling toward a sliver of light in the doorway. On one occasion, a prankster created the electrical failure by removing a



First team to go to state, 1923 - 24 (runner-up winners).

vital fuse. After classes enjoyed an hour of freedom in the sunshine, someone discovered the cause. A strong padlock prevented any such repeated "outage."

Another infraction of school rules was never eliminated that year. Since the makeshift walls that divided the classrooms didn't connect with the ceiling and floor of the cellar, paper wad missiles were forever soaring through openings above. Ground volleys also whizzed across the floor below. (Those who were high-school students then still remember the 1940-1941 term as "the year we went to school in the storm cave.")

When the fourth and final Port School was completed, it contained 18 classrooms; a high-school library; numerous administrative offices, work rooms, and storage rooms; a darkroom for audio-visual education; a school store where snacks, school supplies, and textbooks were available; a sick bay equipped with a hospital bed; a recreation room containing six ping-pong tables; and a cafeteria that contained a large kitchen, pantry, and two dining areas. The gymnasium had four dressing rooms and a seating capacity of 1,000. The auditorium contained a large stage and two dressing rooms. Its seating capacity was 800 to 1,000.

Almost as soon as the last Port School building was finished, the

United States entered World War II, and the exodus from the rural area began. The community's young men enlisted in military services; many never returned. Entire families and young adults left to work at plentiful, good-paying wartime jobs and never moved back. When Port annexed with Sentinel School in 1966, 106 students enrolled there; twenty transferred to other districts.

A few attempts were made to utilize the abandoned school building for commercial purposes, but none proved successful. The structure finally sold for salvage in the 1970's. Its native stone, steel girders, wood flooring, and other lumber vanished. Today little remains except portions of a few walls, the concrete bleachers of the gymnasium, the superintendent's brick home, and the memorable storm cellar. One small sign fifteen miles west of Cordell points the direction to Port School, but a person won't see it unless he knows it's there.

From 1923 when Port was approved as an accredited high school until its final graduating class of 1966, 713 seniors received Port High School diplomas. This isn't an impressive total when compared with urban schools, but it must be remembered that Port was a country school containing the one tiny hamlet for which it was named.

During the Dust Bowl Days and the Great Depression, Port's enrollment actually increased. It took a world war with resulting social and economic changes to weaken the basic core of Port Community. For two decades following World War II, its people valiantly combatted these social forces, but their efforts couldn't overcome the mechanized-agriculture trend. Parents could no longer keep their children down on the farm.

Author's terminal note: Twenty years ago when Port citizens voted to merge with Sentinel School District I-1, they realized that their children would receive better educational opportunities than their declining population could provide. A few years later, Rocky School District #6 made the same decision and also joined with Sentinel. The three combined 94-year-old pioneer schools now form a 253.5 square-mile district with a 1968 enrollment of 331 students and an evaluation of \$8,317,036. These impressive figures prove that Washita County continues to hold the honor of having the largest rural school in Oklahoma--and possibly the nation.) 