

Replanting the Seed: Origins of the Burleson ISD

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Burleson grew steadily in the decade after its founding in 1881 as a stop between Fort Worth and Alvarado on the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad. Many of its residents relocated from frontier villages like Caddo Grove, Marystown, and Brushy Mound to move their crops to market on the railroad. Two miles north of the original townsite of Burleson, the small community of Brushy Mound raised a two-story schoolhouse organized as Alta Vista College in 1885 and chartered Red Oak Academy under the Red Oak Presbytery in 1893. The school suffered financial difficulties, the resignation of three students after the outbreak of war with Spain in 1898, and eventually closed when a typhoid fever epidemic took the lives of two teachers and several students in 1899.

George Washington Bransom, a prosperous farmer and businessman who settled in Burleson early in the town's life, proved invaluable when residents decided to purchase the Red Oak Academy schoolhouse and move it on wagons to Burleson. As Lorena Hardgrove, a 1919 Burleson graduate wrote, "The two-story building was constructed of the heaviest timbers, and the low bid of \$350 proved deficient when the work of moving began. This was cancelled, and a new contract made at \$500. In Burleson the structure was joined to an existent school building, to form the plant for Burleson High School, of which E.T. Genheimer was then principal."¹

The Burleson Independent School District rose from the ashes of a devastating blaze which struck at eight o'clock the evening of 24 September 1909. Several buildings were engulfed in flames, but only the fifteen-room Burleson College fell in charred cinders, this in

¹ Burleson Historical Committee, Burleson—The First One Hundred Years (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981), 82.

spite of citizens' best efforts to combat the fire.² A total of \$25,000 in bonds was raised to construct the three-story red brick school that opened eleven months later on 22 October 1910.³ During the 1921-1922 School Year, 285 students attended ten grades in Burleson. By 1941 that number declined to 271 in twelve grades.⁴ The Burleson School was the grandest building in town and represented the enormous value and investment residents placed in their children's education.

Their sense of duty never faltered, even at the height of the Great Depression. Burleson residents welcomed the Public Works Administration to town in 1936, and together they built a modern gymnasium to serve the community at a cost of \$18,460⁵. A local man, Emmett Harris, was the contractor for the construction. A thousand people packed into the massive building for its dedication on October 9, 1936. The keynote speaker, Texas Attorney General McCraw, declared, "This building is a monument that time never can destroy," and continued "Nothing can destroy the deeds and influences of the young men and women who will receive their training here." "This gymnasium represents much more than the \$20,000 spent in its construction," he said. "It is a tribute to the citizens of this community and shows they are willing to go the limit that their children may have the best of opportunities."⁶

The gymnasium not only served the school district, it served the community as well. Doris Jo (Wood) Haas, a lifelong resident of Burleson, recalls watching the building's construction in fifth grade. "It was a wonderful thing to us. In the summer time it became a

² "\$12,000 Fire at Burleson," *Dallas Morning News*, 25 September 1909.

³ "New School Opens," *Dallas Morning News*, 22 Oct. 1910, 2.

⁴ Burleson Historical Committee, Burleson—The First One Hundred Years (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981), 12-13.

⁵ Robert Leighninger, "Re: Threatened WPA Gymnasium in Burleson, TX." E-mail to Robert Griffith, 17 Feb. 2009.

⁶ "New Burleson Gym Dedicated," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 10 October 1936.

skating rink. All ages came to watch or to learn to skate. At the south end was the Homemaking area. There was a kitchen, and I learned to sew in another room.”⁷ Haas continued, “The boys had FFA (Future Farmers of America) classes in the basement underneath the stage in the gym with Ben Whitehouse. The Senior Banquet, Graduation, piano recitals, everything took place in that building. About 1937 we started having fairs in the gymnasium. The gym would be full of tables of everything that people had grown in their garden or grown on their farm, baked pies and cakes or hand sewn clothes or quilts, etc. These would all be judged and blue, red and white ribbons would be given out. The gym was all we had. I graduated from high school there in 1941.”⁸

Gene Harris, whose father Emmett built the gymnasium, gave a statement to Bill Hanna at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram in February 2009: “The thing I remember more than anything is it had the prettiest polished oak floor,” Harris said. “Back in those days, everything was oiled down to keep the dust down. For several years, we were forbidden to walk on it with our shoes on. It was prettiest thing you could imagine, with the windows all the way around that pushed out to provide ventilation. You didn’t have air conditioning in those days.”⁹

The first edition of “The Elk,” published in 1941 by the graduating class, honored J.W. Norwood¹⁰, superintendant of the Burleson ISD from 1924 until 1956.¹¹ A 1941 graduate still

⁷ Doris Jo Haas, interview by Dorothy Nash, written notes, Burleson, Texas, 2006.

⁸ Doris Jo Haas, “Re: Nola Dunn News.” E-mail to Robert A. Griffith, 12 Jan. 2008.

⁹ Hanna, Bill. “In need of costly repairs, 1930s gymnasium is stuck in limbo.” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* 21 Feb. 2009.

¹⁰ Burleson Senior Class of 1941, The Elk 1941 (Burleson: 1941).

¹¹ Burleson Historical Committee, Burleson—The First One Hundred Years (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981), 12-13.

remembers one of Mr. Norwood's oft-used admonishments: "Fools' names, like fools' faces, always seen in public places."¹²

In 1942 after the outbreak of war with Japan and Germany, the editors of "The Elk" adopted a patriotic tone with their dedication "to those Ex-Students of Burleson High School who are fighting in the cause of democracy on land, on sea, and in the air".¹³ In the midst of heavy fighting in Europe and the South Pacific in April 1944, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Warren proposed an idea to build a school lunch room as "a permanent memorial to our boys in service".¹⁴ A community meeting raised \$965 "in less time than it takes to tell about it," according to the *Burleson News*. "If the ballance (sic) of the work, even toward completion of the building was done as fast as this money was raised," the *News* stated, "the building would be ready to occupy by the end of the week."¹⁵

Their devotion and determination paid off. In 1947, the Burleson ISD constructed its first elementary school (later named for long-time teacher Nola Dunn), and opened a dedicated lunch room. The Burleson School Lunch Room, at the corner of Ellison & Dobson Streets on the northwest corner of the property, boasted a spacious kitchen, dining room, and recreational area.¹⁶ Early on, only one employee served meals, with parents and caring residents helping out. Later, Ethel Noe, Mabel Shannon, Opal Dunn, and Leona Hill were among the ladies who dished

¹² Anonymous, "Re: Burleson in Print." E-mail to Robert A. Griffith 22 Feb. 2009.

¹³ Burleson Senior Class of 1942, The Elk 1942 (Burleson: 1942).

¹⁴ "Build Lunch Room as Memorial to Our Boys In Service, Suggested." *Burleson News* 13 April 1944, 1.

¹⁵ "Crowd Attending Program Tuesday Night Raised \$965 For Lunchroom Building," *Burleson News* 30 September 1944, 1.

¹⁶ Burleson Historical Committee, Burleson—The First One Hundred Years (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1981), 16-17.

up made-from-scratch meals for the kids. In the late 1950s, Fridays were “Sandwich Day,” the only time kids could choose between tuna, bologna, and PB&J.¹⁷

“Record No. of 701 students enrolled in Burleson Schools,” reads the headline of the 4 September 1958 edition of the *Burleson News*. The article continues, “The 1st and 4th grades are suffering most with 75 and 74 students respectfully, registered in these two grades. Supt. J.L. Hughes started out this week looking for class-room furniture which will be placed in the room now used as the office of the Supt. There are 407 students enrolled in the elementary school; 166 in junior high and 128 in high school.”¹⁸

In 1959, the Burleson High School opened at 517 SW Johnson Avenue in the western part of the sprawling town, marking the first time in the district’s history all grades were not located on the same property. Still, the importance of the gymnasium and lunch room to the community were apparent in numerous articles in the *Burleson News*, including one from February 18, 1960 which began, “Citizens of Burleson are invited to a meeting of the Civic Club Feb. 23rd in the Cafeteria Bldg at 7:30 p.m. The purpose of the meeting is to nominate candidates for Mayor and two Councilmen and to discuss other topics of interest to citizens of Burleson.”¹⁹ On April 21st, 1960 the *Burleson News* encouraged folks to visit the grade school gym for Family Night, stating, “Besides free cold drinks, coffee and cookies, you may play games of 42, canasta and checkers, or entertain yourself talking with your friends.”²⁰

In 1964, the old three-story red-brick schoolhouse constructed as the first project of the newly-formed Burleson Independent School District in 1910 fell to the wrecking ball. The

¹⁷ Michelle Mercer Griffith, interview by Robert Griffith, Burleson, Texas, 30 October 2007.

¹⁸ “Record No. of 701 Students Enrolled,” *Burleson News* 4 September 1958, 1.

¹⁹ “Civic Club Meeting Called,” *Burleson News* 18 February 1960.

²⁰ “Everyone Welcome to Jim Standrige “Family Night” at Grade School Gym,” *Burleson News* 21 April 1960.

elementary school library moved into the front of the lunch room and doubled as a classroom as the student population continued to expand.

The Burleson Independent School District, never one to waste a square foot of useable space, converted the auditorium at Nola Dunn into a new lunch room in 1967. At last, Nola Dunn emerged as the elementary school it resembles today. The old lunch room building became ‘The Niche,’ a place for teachers to borrow classroom supplies, prepare materials, and attend workshops.

The windows of the gymnasium were boarded up and an air-conditioning system installed during a major remodel in 1977. Robert Griffith remembers ducking under scaffolding when a mural of a longhorn went up on the south interior wall in 1995. Rubber-tile flooring went down about that time, as did blue carpeting on the bleachers. Music lessons, school plays, and the fall carnival kept the gymnasium lively. And when Principal Harold Moore retired in May 1996, several hundred Nola Dunn students surprised him by singing “Lean on Me.”

The Nola Dunn campus closed in 1998, only to briefly reopen as the district’s alternative school, Crossroads Learning Center, during the 1999-2000 School Year. When Crossroads moved to the Kerr Middle School Campus, the school underwent extensive repairs and reopened in 2001 as the Academy at Nola Dunn.

A new generation of Burleson’s youth are learning, laughing, and playing in the oldest and most storied buildings in the Burleson Independent School District. The Gymnasium, home to decades of spirited basketball games, fall carnivals, physical education classes, graduations, celebrations, and even line-dancing lessons; and the lunch room, once the only place where students could eat together at a table, have become firmly entrenched in Burleson life. Unfortunately, the Burleson Independent School District, caretaker of ten elementary schools,

two middle schools, and soon to be two high schools, has seen fit to demolish the historic Nola Dunn campus, despite pleas from citizens to repurpose the buildings so they can continue their educational and community-oriented service. Razing of the campus began on February 26, 2009 with the 1947 vocational “shop” building. For now, it appears the gymnasium and lunch room may be spared as a \$22,000,000 school rises from the ashes of the old, just as it did a century ago...

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