

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

School Days

Part 1 – The Center School

The 12 years of public schooling form a major part of anyone's life growing up. In my case in Wenham it was the eight years from 1937 through 1944 in the second through ninth grades in the Center School, after which we Wenham kids were off to Beverly High for our high school years (we could choose Hamilton High School but few did). These school days formed just about all of my interaction with my peer group (classmates) in the town due to my living way out in West Wenham, too far out of town to participate in downtown activities after school.

Center School was aptly named when built in 1907 to bring together the students scattered west to east over town from local schools in West Wenham, East Wenham and Wenham Neck with the village center students in the small school building adjacent to Town Hall where they had been moved from classrooms within Town Hall. In 1907 the Superintendent of Schools stated: "Within a twelvemonth the children of Wenham have left their limited school quarters, which have sheltered former generations, some of whom are now citizens and parents, who attach many pleasant associations to the long standing walls. The pupils are now housed in a modern, roomy, well heated and finely ventilated building. Some trouble was experienced at first by a great number of requests to visit the basement, but this is gradually improving as the novelty wears off." Indoor plumbing was a new thing for school kids.

This wasn't the school that I came to because in 1919, with increased enrollment of grades 7 and 8, it was apparent that a larger building was needed. The following year, 1920, the town voted to add a \$41,000 extension. The expanded Center School had a basement lunchroom, a manual training and printing room, three classrooms and a sewing and cooking room on the first floor. On the second floor, there were two more classrooms, an assembly hall and the principal's office.

Back in 1907 initially, the town used a motor truck to bring the outlying students to the Center School, but it was not large enough. Later, a horse drawn, covered barge transported the 22 students from the Neck and East districts, but it was found unsatisfactory.

By my time Sidney Prince, a farmer and milk dealer on Grapevine Road, operated a school bus. His daily route brought in students from the Neck and East Wenham to school, then proceeded to West Wenham for students living in that part of

town and at Idlewood Lake. He reversed this order when returning students to their homes at the end of the school day. We benefitted in West Wenham being the last to get picked up in the morning and first to get home in the afternoon.

So what about this "modern, roomy, well heated and finely ventilated building?" Although described as a two story structure, it was actually a three story structure, an early example of the much later popular "split level" type. Upon entering the "boy's door" (today's west entrance, the "girl's door" faces the Buker School today), a choice of up or down half flights of stairs had to be made.

Down to the left led to the basement where, from the immediate left clockwise, were the manual training and printing room, the lunchroom, the "girls basement" and the "boys basement." Off the latter, a mysterious door (through which we boys were forbidden to pass) opened into the bowels of the building where Mr Wildes, the janitor, reigned supreme by his huge furnace and coal bins. All these rooms were well lit by the large basement windows set into the granite foundation, split level style.

Back upstairs the up to the right stairway led to the first floor main hall, off which the classrooms were arranged, from the immediate left clockwise, a small room (the purpose for which I no longer recall, maybe it was the school nurse's room), the cooking and sewing room, the first/second grades room and the third/fourth grades room.

From my grade on as I moved up through junior high, the classrooms were all double classes (excepting grade 9 in a smaller room), usually no more than a couple of dozen students in the two combined classes. After I moved on to third grade, the second grade was split off on its own as the incoming first graders were rapidly increasing in numbers.

Bypassing the first floor main hall and continuing up the stairwell to the second floor main hall we came to, from the immediate left clockwise, the principal, Miss Buker's office (not a place anyone wished to be sent to for infringing school rules), the ninth grade room (smaller), the assembly hall (larger), the seventh/eighth grades room and the fifth/sixth grades room. Each homeroom had a narrow hallway along its interior wall lined with coat

hooks where outdoor clothing could be hung in season, with space below for outdoor footwear, first come first served on these and yep, no lockers.

The assembly hall could seat all 150 or so students for special programs. These included school plays and musical presentations and occasional speeches by visiting dignitaries like the superintendent of schools, who once regaled us with his tale of his Alaskan adventure. Nope, no visuals, just talk backed up by a rather off white (kinda yellow) polar bear skin.

Our weekly music appreciation classes also took place here where the school piano (a big grand no less) and big floor model radio/record player were located. Radio? Well, music appreciation at times included listening to J. Walter Damrosch (how did I remember his name?) explaining what we were supposed to listen for in selections of classical music he played for school children wherever his program was received.

No gym? Not as such, I recall we used the assembly hall for physical training. The assembly hall seating comprised sections of folding wooden benches that were moved aside for phys ed classes.

In the front of the building on the second floor a large closet space between the seventh/eighth grades and fifth/sixth grades rooms had been converted into a small library administered by long time seventh/eighth grades teacher, Miss Bullis.

In junior high (seventh/eighth/ninth grades) we boys got to do manual training and (in ninth grade) printing. These were our favorite classes, hands-on learning with tools and equipment not available to us at home. We all liked and admired our instructor Mr Burr. I do not recall my two sisters' reaction to their cooking and sewing classes (sometimes known as "home ec").

The most enduring memory of Center School itself is the smell of the green powder that the janitor spread over the well worn hardwood floors when he swept up to lay the dust from his sweeping (I understand that smells do indeed supply our most enduring memories.) What, no vacuum cleaner? Nope.

Coming up I will introduce the (mostly) wonderful group of teachers I had during those eight years, several of whom had a long lasting influence on my life.

(If you wish to read a lot more about Wenham schools, go online to Jack Hauck's *Treasures of Wenham History*. Just google that title and it will come up under the Hamilton/Wenham Library heading where you'll find Wenham Schools listed.)