



Old Laguna School. This school began in 1865 as Petroleum School, one of the earliest in the county's school system. In 1875, when this building was built, its name was changed to Laguna. It closed around 1935, when the district was annexed by Santa Cruz City District.

I. Introduction

It seems the fashion in some quarters today to decry the state of modern education; educators and parents wring their hands over seemingly insurmountable problems: overcrowded classrooms or-- just as bad--declining enrollments; a citizenry that proclaims the necessity for a free public education for all but is unwilling to pay enough taxes to support it; inadequate school facilities; poorly trained teachers; curricula that fail to educate children properly; lack of student discipline--the list of complaints is a long one.

Yet a study of the history of our schools makes plain that all these problems, staggering though they might seem to us who are trying to cope with them today, do not presage the imminent demise of the public school system. The veil of nostalgia that so often cloaks the past tends to make us forget that such problems have been around for a long time--and in spite of it all, the school system has survived.

Just for example: this year in California a taxpayers' revolt brought about a slashing of property taxes that cut deeply and painfully into school budgets, and some people were predicting this would prove to be a death blow to the schools. The situation, however, was not unprecedented. A similar taxpayers' revolt--in the early 1870s--forced some Santa Cruz County schools to close for a while. Yet the school system survived and recovered.

And the difficulty in passing school bonds is certainly not unique to our times. Many times in the past the county's school system has had to make do with makeshift housing while it waited for reluctant voters to loosen the purse strings. From the fall of 1906 to the spring of 1909, for instance, Watsonville children were forced to attend school in the Gas House, a building rented from the Watsonville Power and Light Company, because south county residents had repeatedly turned down the desperately needed school bonds at the polls.

Inadequate school facilities? At different times in Santa Cruz County school has been held in adobe huts, family parlors, one-room cabins of rough redwood planks through which the wind whistled, church basements, and, in one instance, in a butcher shop. In 1947, during that crisis period of overcrowded classrooms following the war, Scotts Valley school children attended class in an old firehouse with a dirt floor, through which a river of mud flowed when it rained.

What about the quality of education? There were good teachers and bad back then, just as there are today (though the names of the indifferent teachers of the past are generally forgotten, while only those of the good ones survive). Certainly there is evidence to show that teachers of the past had far less training for their profession than they do today. And there are records to show that in spite of the strict and sometimes harsh discipline practiced in those early classrooms, unruly student behavior was often quite a problem. And while we can easily find fault with the curriculum of today's schools, one suspects after reading the old teaching manuals that the often uninspired curriculum of the past, with its heavy emphasis on rote and drill, caused more than one student to nod off to sleep at his or her desk.

And while we are deploring the inadequacies of our present school system, we might also recall the fact that in Santa Cruz County of 1861, only 30 percent of the school age population went to school at all.

A study of the history of the schools helps to put it all in perspective. Such a study reveals, of course, the changes that have occurred with the passing years. But it also reveals how many things remain the same; the problems and issues that are with us today have been faced before, and weathered. Momentous political events have swept the social scene, epidemics (which closed many schools in the 1860s and '70s), fires (the fate of so many of those early wooden schoolhouses), and other assorted disasters have come and gone, and still the school system has managed to survive.

The first public school in the county was built in 1857, in the little settlement of Santa Cruz, still called "the Mission" by many in those days. That first school, Mission Hill, was the start of our local public school system. There have been over 100 schools in the county since then. Of course it would be impossible in a book of this size to trace the history of each one. Indeed, many of them we know very little about. This history can only give the reader an overview, a general idea of what the school system was like and how it grew. But it's been said that if we want to understand a society we should look at the way it educates its children, and if this book aids in that study it will have served its purpose.

Because there was schooling before there were schools, we start our history 200 years ago, some 80 years before the first schoolhouse went up on Mission Hill. . .