

To Don Russell —
he started something big.

Foreword

THIS HISTORY OF THE HAZELWOOD SCHOOL DISTRICT started out as a presentation to retiring school superintendent Clifford R. Kirby, prepared by a number of teachers and PTA workers for his retirement dinner in 1967.

The Hazelwood board of education felt that the patrons of the district would be more capable of understanding and anticipating future crises if they had accurate information available on the heritage of their school system.

A close examination of the presentation revealed a number of inaccuracies. This is due to the fact that those putting it together were working under pressure of deadline and they did not have at their disposal the knowledge of sources or research techniques used by the professional historian.

Our membership in the Mercantile Library, State Historical Society of Missouri, Missouri Historical Society, and the Central Public Library of the City of St. Louis — plus personal files containing material used in preparing specialized area histories over the past several years — have yielded many of the answers we needed.

A special acknowledgement is to be made to the officers and directors of Land Title Insurance Company, Clayton, who allowed us the use of their vast repository of records to identify data on the school lands of the 19th century. Henry Strecker of that firm spent enough time on the

high ladders of the record rooms to develop a more or less permanent nose bleed. Those rooms — two floors of them — are partitioned with shelving and files running to within a few inches of the 20-foot ceiling. To locate data on the old Brown school, for instance, Strecker consulted at least a dozen of those books, taking about 45 minutes, before he found the notation of date showing the transfer of land to the neighborhood farmers who comprised the three-man board of education.

The title company is the one used by Don O. Russell, the Hazelwood board's legal counsel, in compilation of data needed to secure clear title to school sites purchased by the district.

The others to whom credit is due are far too numerous to mention. Interviews with those who taught or attended the old one-room rural schools a half-century ago were simply delightful. Some of the individual school histories were written by the author as long as 10 years ago, and of course some of those interviewed at that time no longer are with us. All are acknowledged in the narrative.

If history is to be described as a course of monumental events, then there is little history connected with the Hazelwood School District. We are thinking in particular of the departure of the Lewis and Clark expedition from the mouth of Wood River [a point which now happens to be in the Hazelwood School District, due to the wandering of the Mississippi River.] Or the great St. Louis fire and cholera epidemic of 1849. The opening of Eads Bridge; the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904.

Those events were news — unusual occurrences which do not really mirror life in these United States as it existed more than a century ago. The history of the Hazelwood School District is an elusive one. It is a study in dynamics — the precipitous change from a somnolent group of 13 widely separated little school buildings to a vibrant, urban goliath bent upon the nearly impossible task of preserving the identity of each of tens of thousands of students, while providing an economical and efficient education with too little revenue, and at the same time teaching each of those children to compete effectively in a society geared to render the moon rockets obsolete before they take off.

-Aprillo, 1969

*School days, school days,
Dear old golden rule days,
Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic,
Taught to the tune of a hick 'ry stick.
You were my queen in calico,
I was your bashful barefoot beau,
And you wrote on my slate, "I love you so,"
When we were a couple of kids.*

— Gus Edwards, 1907

Introduction

THE HAZELWOOD SCHOOL DISTRICT IS *ONE* BIG hunk of ground. On the west the boundary reaches from the old Rock Road bridge over the Missouri, then up around the great bend of the river on the north, over past the confluence to the new Chain of Rocks bridge across the Mississippi on the east, and then straight west, generally following the route of Interstate Highway 270, a few blocks to the south.

Excepted is a sizeable gouge out of the center of the district from the south, and this includes Florissant's so-called "Old Town" section, generally marked on the west and north by the course of the historic Coldwater Creek. The eastern boundary of this gouge begins about a mile west of the Y of the Halls Ferrys — New and Old — and follows a section line up to an intersection with the creek.

All told we're talking about 78 square miles of district, and that is just 17 square miles larger than the City of St. Louis.

In the earliest days of St. Louis County this was simply the periphery of one of the most fertile valleys on earth. Although precise documentation has yet to be discovered, the old town of Florissant — known then as St. Ferdinand — is believed to have been founded in 1786, just 22 years after the founding of St. Louis. Prior to that time the area was a prime hunting and gathering ground for nomadic Indian tribes. We shall quote these paragraphs from our *History of Florissant*:

"As the earthmovers roared down through the valley in the post-World War II years, shearing -the tops from the ridges and filling the draws, the telltale signs of early habitation were exposed to sunlight. Firepits, postmolds and refuse pits indicated that, if the area was not actually the home of vast numbers of Indians, at least it was a large hunting camp at which the inhabitants spent several weeks out of the year.

"One such evidence was uncovered on a tract east of town, on a farm located approximately 1/2-mile south of Highway 140 [now U.S. 67] and about 1/4-mile east of New Halls Ferry Road. As the graders for the Las Lomas subdivision peeled layers off a ridge near Coldwater Creek, a row of black circles appeared some five feet below the original grade. They were about 15 feet apart and 15 to 18 inches in diameter, with the inner circumference lined with blackened limestone slabs.

"These were the firepits of a primitive culture. There is a rule of thumb on soil buildup — an inch a century. This would indicate that the pits were used some 6,000 years ago, or about 4,000 BC, possibly considerably before. Bits of animal bone were found in the pits, and some projectile points similar to those identified with the Paleo Indian culture — probably left in the game during the roast.

"Smaller circles, much closer together, formed large ovals in several areas of the building site. These were postmolds — the deteriorated remains of poles imbedded in the earth to form the walls of prehistoric homes or hunting lodges.

"Portions of a figurine also were discovered, along with fragments of human bone. Great quantities of fish bones, decomposed but not petrified, were found, indicating that the Missouri was up to her old tricks long before the white man first cussed her out.

"A site at Musick's Ferry, at the end of Halls Ferry Road, indicated that the bluff was occupied by a number of cultures. Artifacts were found from the late Archaic period, the late Hopewell period, late Woodland and early Mississippian cultures."

Only a few years ago a couple of young boys pulled a huge bone from the bed of Coldwater Creek, which authorities at the Museum of Science and Natural History indicated was an elephant bone of some sort — probably mammoth or mastodon.

One of the Frenchmen who helped found St. Louis was named Francois Dlwegant *dit* (nicknamed, or known as) Beausosier. He led a colony of St. Louis pioneers to the banks of Coldwater, and thus started the old town of Florissant, or St. Ferdinand. As was the habit of the pioneer French, the old town was laid out in the grid system of the Spaniards. There were 16 even squares, 320 feet to a side. Across the creek (and into lands now occupied by the school district) were the

commonfields. These were strips of ground about 180 feet wide and reaching from the creek to the Missouri bottomlands. These were apportioned to the citizens in accordance with their need and ability to work the ground. The Hazelwood School District now owns no less than 11 buildings on these former commonfields.

The area was initially settled by the French, with only a handful of Spanish. It was dangerous to live in an outlying farm dwelling without a community of fellow citizens at hand. Few of the Indians in this area would take a human life, but they would take just about everything else that wasn't nailed down.

Settlement, therefore, was very slow. On the Dupre atlas of 1829, a quarter century after the land was transferred from Spain to France to the United States, the great holdings were still lodged in the names of Auguste and Pierre Chouteau. There were several dozen other names showing of course, but not very many considering the vast size of the district.

Such was not the case in the little village of St. Louis. By the time the Dupre was published, the city had outgrown its knickers. The first schoolmaster, a man named Trudeau, had started a number of schools and given up on all of them. He finally engaged in the fur trade of the Upper Missouri River.

The people evidently had expressed dissatisfaction with the cost of the schools in the early 1800s, because the board of aldermen voted to suspend school one year. St. Louis University — then little more than a junior high school — already was under way. At the seminary on the "Bishop's Farm," founded by the Jesuits, a school for Indian boys opened and closed. [This later became St. Stanislaus Seminary. It is located on Howdershell Road, east of Charbonier Road.] Philippine Duchesne and her community of Sacred Heart nuns at old St. Ferdinand opened and closed a school for Indian girls.

The farmers in the North County detested the idea of being illiterate, but they would rather deny the blessings of an education to their children than lose their labor on the farm.

The land was good to its inhabitants. It served as a breadbasket for the Indians and now it was serving as the breadbasket for all of St. Louis. The flooding of the bottomlands was more than compensated for by the lushness of the rest of the valley. More and more of the ground was placed under cultivation, and the holders of the vast tracts gradually sold off enough portions to make the remainder workable. Thus, the population slowly increased. First a few dozen families, then a few hundred.

As farming techniques developed, and as the quality of the farm implements and horticultural science improved, the occupants of the

land found themselves no longer poor farmers. Few were affluent but they worked hard and saved their money. Gradually, one by one, they became aware that their children were going to have to be equipped with more than a fine set of sinews if they were to compete in the 19th century. These people had no tradition of formal education — free or otherwise — behind them. Few had seen the inside of a classroom at all. Yet, even in their primitive state of pedagogic thinking, they knew that free schools for all children were necessary, and they willingly committed themselves to provide those schools.

One by one, they sold or gave away small parcels of ground, then levied modest taxes against their holdings to pay for a teacher.

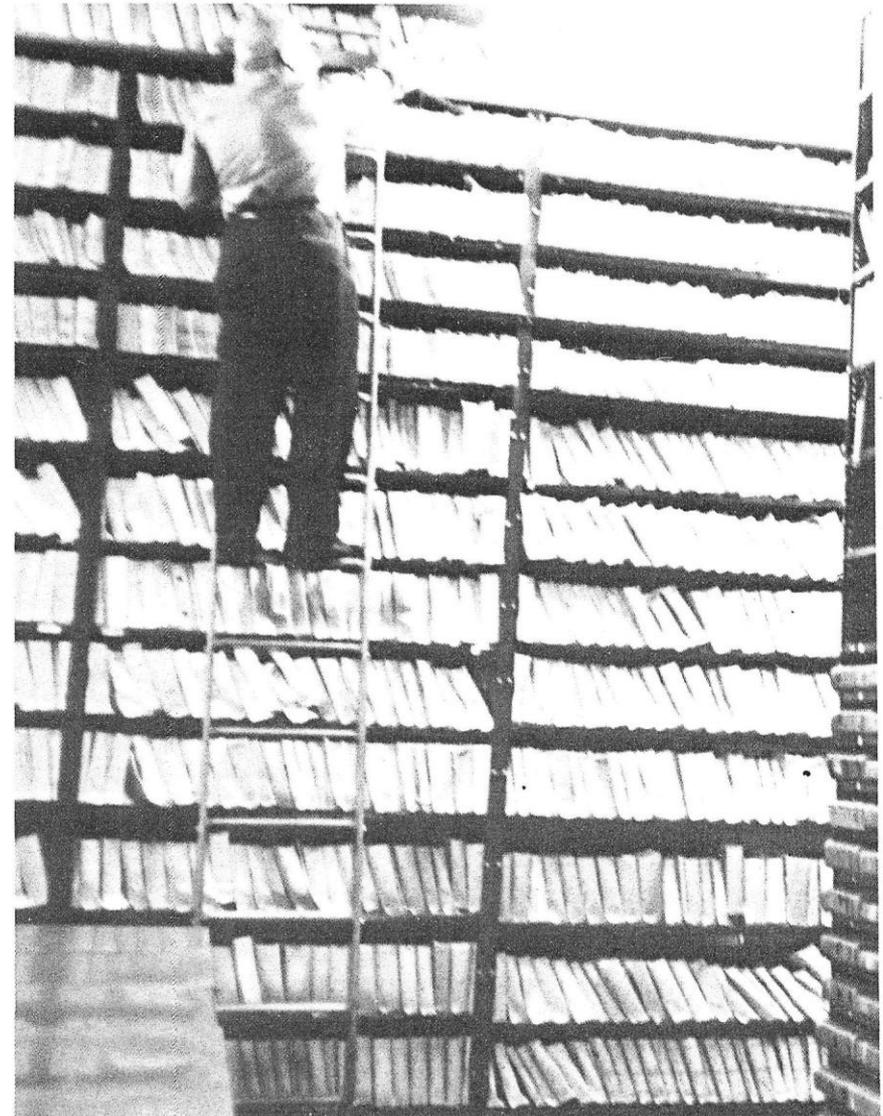
There was ample provision for the creation of public schools in the State of Missouri. The first constitution, written in 1820, called for one or more schools in each congressional township (six miles square) where the poor should be taught totally free of charge. Each township was divided into 36 sections of one square mile each, and the 16th section of each township was to remain in the public domain, with revenues produced by it to go into school funds.

A far-reaching act in 1835 established some method of state control of public education, pegged the length of the school term at no less than six months, established the two-thirds majority necessary for passage of tax levies, up to a maximum of 3 ⅓ cents per \$100 assessed valuation, and established local boards of education to hire teachers and make other arrangements for the conduct of public schools.

In 1839 legislation was passed establishing the office of state superintendent, and in 1853 the legislature provided for a county commissioner to visit, examine the instructors, and award certificates of qualification to them, and to call elections. The schools still were not completely free — those who sent their children had to pay small amounts of tuition. The uniform course of study was legislated two years later, and finally, in 1866, the legislature recognized that free public schools were the duty of all the citizens, and tuition to the elementary grades was halted.

By 1876, when the City of St. Louis elected to divorce itself from the burdensome and vast reaches of St. Louis County, the county area had 82 school districts, including 25 high schools. By 1934 there were 127,529 school districts in the United States. Sixteen years later there were 84,468.

But it was in the middle of the 19th century that the farmers of the North County became concerned enough about the lack of education in their sparsely populated area to do something about it.



Henry Strecker, an official of Land Title Insurance Company, Clayton, searches for Brown school data in cavernous record vaults. It took a 45-minute hunt, crosschecking through dozens of yellowed documents, to uncover clues to the date of transfer of the land to the school district.

