

# B'ham Schools Old As 'Hill'

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Birmingham's public school system, like the city itself, has grown by leaps and bounds. From a modest beginning with a handful of pupils in 1822, the system has rapidly progressed to keep pace with the changing times.

Recognized as one of the best school systems in the state, Birmingham's present organization includes 21 schools, 706 teachers and administrative personnel and accommodates 14,130 students.

Birmingham recognized the need for public education while Michigan was yet a territory. A log school house was erected on the farm of Dr. Ziba Swan in 1822 near the present intersection of Woodward and Quarten.

**THIS SCHOOL**, with Capt. Harvey Parke as teacher, was not a public institution, but was supported by subscriptions per capita of pupils.

In 1834, in accordance with law,



AGNES PARKS  
Hill School teacher in 1881

three school districts in the township were inaugurated. The law also required townships to elect three commissioners whose duties should be to lay off the township into school districts and to number them.

A district school was opened later that year in the old log house of John Hamilton at Hamilton and Woodward. The rear of the frame house was used as a classroom. Rev. Lemuel M. Partridge was teacher in the winter of 1834-35.

Within a year, a frame building was built on the northwest corner of what now is the Chester-W. Maple intersection.

In 1855, Birmingham got its first "real" school house, a red brick building located on the north side of Maple where Southfield comes to an end. It served as a school house until the completion of the Hill School in 1869, whereupon it was converted into a residence by Harry Allen.

The new Hill School, named after the Rev. S. N. Hill of the Presbyterian Church, stood at the southwest corner of Chester and Martin streets.

The Hill School was considered quite an ornament for the village. Tuition was \$5 a term and there were three terms. David Bemis was principal and the entire staff consisted of four teachers. The upper floors of the new building housed the high school.

Principal Bemis received a salary of \$800 a year and his assistants were paid \$7 a week. Birmingham's first graduating public school class was in 1880. Ten years later, the enrollment had increased to 317 with 94 in the high school.

In 1894, with C. F. Waldo as superintendent, the school received recognition from the University of Michigan. The annual 1905 census showed 364 pupils in the system and, by 1910, there were 435.

**THE HILL BUILDING** was no longer adequate to accommodate both grade and high school children and Barnum High was built in 1918. The school system by this



CLASS PICTURE OF 1902 HILL SCHOOL GRADUATES  
Three teachers handled the high school schedule for 13 students.

time had 738 students and 24 teachers.

At this time, the system operated under the "6-3-3" plan and the entire courses of study was reorganized. The "6-3-3" plan had students spend the first six years in elementary school, the 7-8-9th grades in junior high and the 10-11-12th years in high school.

The rapid growth in the area forced the system to expand. Courses such as physical education, science, art and music were added to an increasing curriculum.

Three elementary schools were added in quick succession: Adams, in 1921, when total enrollment reached 1,063; Pierce, in 1924; Barnum, was enlarged in 1924 and '29; and Quarten was constructed in 1927 with an enrollment of 2,800 in the system.

BY 1930, Birmingham schools

had a capacity of 3,330 and an enrollment of 2,661. But the population skyrocketed and in 1940, enrollment climbed to 11,196.

Franklin Elementary School was added to the Birmingham system in a 1945 annexation, and was followed by Bloomfield Village School in 1946 and Walnut Lake Elementary a year later.

In 1950, with the number of students at 15,370, the system built a new school, Torry elementary, to take care of the crowded conditions.

The construction of Birmingham High, now Seaholm, was completed in 1952 and Baldwin was made into an elementary institution. Birmingham High took in 1,200 students in grades 9-12.

APPROXIMATELY 3% new students per day arrived in the Birmingham School District in 1963 and the increased enrollment

throughout the fifties resulted in a rapid school-building program.

Greenfield, Harlan, Meadow Lake, Midvale, Pembroke and Valleywoods elementary schools were added as well as Derby Junior High, which was finished in 1958. The program was climaxed with the completion of Groves Junior-Senior High in 1959.

Beverly elementary became overcrowded in 1962 and Berkshire Junior High, the newest of the schools, was erected in 1963. This move changed Groves into a full senior high. Westchester Elementary was completed in 1962.

A high quality teaching staff that boasted 37.2 per cent with M.A. or higher degrees in 1962-63 and an annual expenditure that almost reached \$8 million in 1962-63 helps keep Birmingham's school system as one of the best in the state.

## BIGELOW WAS FIRST WEST POINT GRAD

# A Boy's Life in Birmingham 85 Years Ago

Mortimer C. Bigelow, Birmingham's first West Point graduate, held many boyhood memories of his home town dear to him even as he served as a captain in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Yellowstone, Wyo. in 1908.

Dated February, 1908, a letter written by the son of John Allen Bigelow, who was a prominent businessman and civic leader, is a nostalgic word-picture of a boy's life in Birmingham more than 85 years ago.

The explanatory words enclosed with parentheses were not a part of the original letter, but added for the enlightenment of present-day readers.

"THE BIRMINGHAM" as I remember it best was a clean little country village, dependent only upon itself. Our wants were few and those few were easily supplied within our own immediate surroundings.

"The big world outside passed us by and we noted it not. I venture to say that we were comparatively happy.

"We watched the sun set, down through the long rows of maples. The boys played baseball in the street until it got too dark, and then the leader of the village band got out in front of the foundry (which stood on E. Maple, east of the present Briggs Building) and played upon his cornet what I know to have been his version of the army Reveille, calling members of the village band to make wondrous noises as they play 'No. 4. in the other book.'

"THEN ABOUT half past nine, the lights in the stores began to go out. Nearly everyone was getting ready to go to bed and dear old Hugh Irving (owner of a hardware store on Woodward avenue about where Huston's hardware is now) would come along up the street, carrying his lantern on his way home from the store.

"That was a sign that Birmingham was almost asleep. Later on, the melancholy days of September came, when we had to take our books and answer the call of the long-silent school bell.

"When we went out for recess, we found all our favorite marble grounds grown up with weeds and everything had an air of desolation.

"But the fall had its compensations. At 4 p.m., that wild mob of children that are almost grandmothers and grandfathers now, would race out of the school house (Hill school) past the beautiful row of walnut trees, and down Mill street (West Maple) to the post-office (located in the store of Bigelow and Whitehead, now Shain's drug store), rushing in like a torrent to ask Mr. Bigelow (who was postmaster) or Mr. Whitehead (Almeron Whitehead, a brother-in-law and business partner of J. A. Bigelow) if there was any mail.

"We did not have much time to waste in town. We had to go home and get the old shot gun. We hurried down to the mill (located just west of the present W. Maple bridge) and over on the west side of the mill pond (now Quarten

Lake), up a long lane at the end of which were some grand woods.

"THERE WERE GREAT big hickory trees there, and by sitting patiently on a log, we could hear a fox squirrel getting his dinner way up in tops of one of those forest monarchs that are gone now. We killed him and took him home in triumph.

"Then coming home, there was that point on the west side of the pond, where, if one was careful and came down through the bushes, he would find a pair of teal ducks. "We might be able to shoot one



MORTIMER BIGELOW  
Lived in early Birmingham

of them and the little 'missie' would have to go to the south alone. It was a grand day.

"Later on the holidays came and with them the snow. Then we went up into the tamarack swamps by Gus Torry's (A farmer living about five miles west of Birmingham) and put our ferrets into poor little Molly Cottontail's home and killed her when she ran out.

"Our dogs chased the ruffled grouse out of the last stronghold that they held. We came out on the Franklin road (West Maple road) in the evening, tired and hungry and hoping that Ed Miller (Bloomfield Township treasurer, 1878) would come along and give us all a ride home, where the good mother was waiting for us and wondering whether we had been shot or not.

"LATER ON the snow got deeper and we knew that no one ever had such a hard time as we did, shovelling the snow off the north and south walks. (The Bigelows lived on the northwest corner of W. Maple and Bates, where Jacobson's Inc. is now located).

"But then there was ice on the mill pond. The muskrat skins were prime and Mark Masters would go as high as \$7 a piece for them. Then still later, we began to go out on the south side of the barn in the chicken yard and watch the snow melting as the sun came north on its yearly journey.

"A warm day gave our youthful optimistic spirits grounds for stating positively to father at supper

ime that we would have an early spring and that the fish would be running soon.

"As we would go to sleep listening to the far away puffing of an engine pulling a heavy train up the grade from Royal Oak we would have visions of fish rolling their backs out of water, so large that we would be a little frightened.

"They would be just outside the bog, and by the edge of the melting ice, out there in the deep water.

"BUT ALAS! In the morning we would find the north and south walks drifted full again. But the spring could not long be denied.

"The cattail swamp between Converse and Thorne's meat market (a little building which stood on the northeast corner of Woodward and Maple) and Jack Baldwin's blacksmith shop began to be covered with water and the street over by Squire James (who owned the whole block, now Shain Park) was a fine place to sail rafts in after school.

"Then there was the time that Sam Mills, Lyman Peabody (owner of general store), John Allen Bigelow, Allie Whitehead (Mortimer's uncle), Jack Baldwin (blacksmith) and Jim Beattie (owner of the village livery stable) used to begin to tell about the fish that they had caught in an earlier day.

"But I must stop here. The remembrances come to me faster than I can write them. You see, all these things will some day form a part of the history of our little town."