

Profile Of An Early Educator



CLARENCE VLIET
In 1915

Clarence Vliet; A Half-Century Of The 3 R's

By LARRY EVOE
Staff Writer

Clarence Vliet has devoted almost his entire 87 years to educating Michigan's young people and was largely responsible for establishing the basis for the topflight school

system Birmingham has today.

Vliet, who still lives in the family home at 416 Brown, was superintendent of the Birmingham schools from 1915 to 1932. His term of service was longer than any previous superintendent or successor.

Born in Clarkston, Vliet graduated from that community's high school in 1892 at the tender age of 16. Borrowing \$100 from a brother, the young Vliet headed for classes at Michigan State Normal School at Ypsilanti.

AFTER A YEAR of study he dropped out of school to spend a year "hunting and fishing." During the summer of his "early retirement" Vliet happened to attend a teachers institute in nearby Holly.

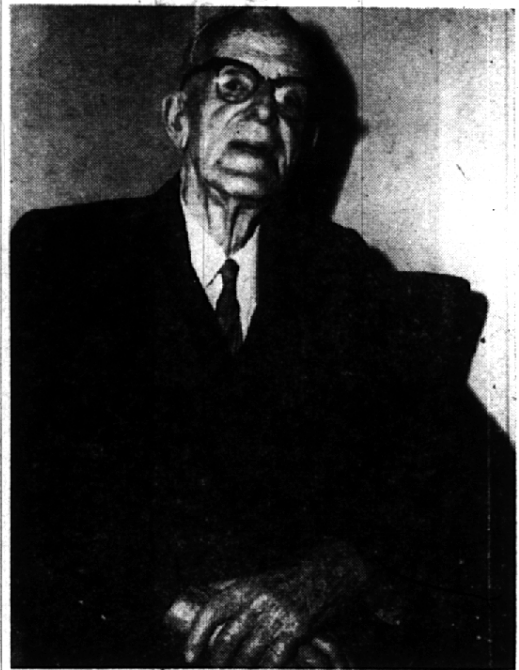
He featured speaker at the institute was Woodbridge N. Ferris, the founder of Ferris State College. From that day on Vliet's life was set.

"He was a magnetic man," Vliet said.

"I took the teacher's examination that fall, passed the test and was given a third grade certificate," he said.

HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENT was to reopen a school that had been closed for a year at Elizabeth Lake. For teaching the eight youngsters enrolled at the school, Vliet earned \$16 a month for the three-month semester.

"My board and room came to \$8 a month, but somehow I managed to save \$24 out of my total salary," he mused. "I would have been able to save another \$5 but I had to walk to Pontiac one day



ECCENTRIC PHOTO

STILL ACTIVE in civic affairs at the age of 87, Clarence Vliet relaxes in the old family home on Brown. Superintendent of Birmingham Schools from 1915 until 1932, Vliet was largely responsible for establishing the town's present school system. He began his teaching career at the age of 17.

to have a tooth pulled," he said.

After a single term in a school at Seymour Lake, Vliet returned to his home town of Clarkston and began teaching in the high school for \$30 a month.

TWO YEARS LATER, after receiving a first grade certificate he was named principal of Clarkston High School. The next three summers were spent attending the University of Michigan where Vliet was awarded a life teaching certificate.

During his summers at U-M Vliet met and married Mina Wilde. After his graduation from Michigan, Vliet was offered and accepted the job of superintendent in the school district of Leslie near Jackson where he remained for the next 12 years.

IN 1915 VLIET and his wife were faced with a big decision. He was offered two jobs, one in the math department at Michigan and another as superintendent of schools in the Village of Birmingham.

Fortunately for Birmingham he chose the latter.

When Mr. and Mrs. Vliet arrived in Birmingham with their two children, they found a "nice quiet village of about 1,500 people."

"I had 15 teachers, one building (Hill School) and one floor finished at Barnum," Vliet said. For his efforts he was to receive \$1,500 a year.

"It was obvious Birmingham was a school district that was going to grow," he said.

"ALTHOUGH THE ACADEMIC setup was in good shape, no attempt had been made to provide a vocational or commercial program, and the athletic program was indifferent," he recalled.

Vliet describes his 15 years in Birmingham as follows: 1920-1926: H. C. Clement; 1926-1930: R. J. Coryell; 1930 to 1931: Leigh Lynch; 1931-1935: Ray A. Palmer; 1935-1938: Earl G. Potter; 1939 to 1939: Charles S. Kinnison; 1939 to 1947: Lee E. Joslyn; 1947 to 1957: Earnest W. Seaholm; 1957-58: Wylie E. Groves; 1958 to 1963: Kathryn Loomis; 1964 to present: E. Ross Hanson.

Birmingham as being a battle over one bond issue after another and of arguing with architect after architect over building design.

"The first bond we had to get passed was for \$179,000 needed to construct the Baldwin School. Because it was the first bonding proposal ever brought before the voters, many thought it would fail. "But it didn't," he chuckled.

THE ONLY TIME he ever lost a bonding program was for the Adams School.

"Six months later those who were against it admitted they were wrong, another election was scheduled and approved without any trouble," he said.

During his administration Vliet also supervised the construction of Quarton and Pierce schools, saw Barnum enlarged and purchased the property for Derby Junior High.

When he left the system in 1932 his salary had risen to \$7,500 a year and the staff had grown to 115 teachers and administrators.

Vliet believes that he ran a "hard" school system.

"THE PROBATE COURT had fewer cases involving juveniles to handle in those days," he mused.

Between the time he left Birmingham and his permanent retirement in 1945, Vliet worked variously with the state schools, served as superintendent of the Bellview, Mich., schools and set up his own school bonding firm.

To help pass the time he later served as secretary of the retail merchants association and became secretary of the chamber of commerce when it was formed in 1948.

A former Birmingham city commissioner, he also served a term on the Oakland County Board of Supervisors, was president of the YFCA and on the Community House board of directors.

A CHARTER MEMBER of the Birmingham Rotary Club and a former president of that organization, he is also an accomplished after-dinner speaker.

Today he is still active in the Rotary, is beginning his 60th year as a Mason and admits to being a voting Republican.

Civil War Souvenir Now Only a Memory

The east yard of Hill School in 1903 (then the Birmingham school house) once was the resting place for a civil war memorial for which townpeople formed an association and collected 25 cents from the residents.

After careful investigation from the group, led by John Allen Bigelow, a captain in the Civil War who had lost an arm in the services of the northern forces, a cannon was located from Fort Morgan, Ala.

The city commissioned John Felder, a stone worker of considerable skill, to construct a base of concrete on the Hill school grounds, and on this the cannon rested.

"THE WAY IT is aimed now," reported The Eccentric, "should it ever go off, we can see a finish to George Tom's wood shed."

In the fall of 1904, at proper ceremonies under the auspices of the Memorial Association, the history of Birmingham's Civil War Relic became known.

The relic was a rebel gun fired at Farragut in the Battle of Mobile

Bay, and was designed to protect the covered way of the fort as well as the sea.

As the years passed, townspeople became indifferent to the Civil War memorial. School children clambered and climbed over and on it and by 1914 the historic cannon lay broken and dismantled in deep grass.

"A RANK OUTRAGE!" cried The Eccentric. "The cannon is a broken shameful sight. Even the cement base is cracked. It is said that this is the third time this careless destruction of government property has been done.

"Go and look at it. You will blush with shame for the heedlessness of our board of education, for the lack of care given to our historical gun and for the village council to whom the gun was given!"

Although the cannon was restored for Clarence Vliet, who came to Birmingham as superintendent of schools in 1915, it disappeared shortly after the start of World War II.

Finances Created Problems In Early Years for B of E

By MARY BAHN
Staff Writer

Birmingham's Board of Education has faced many problems since its official recordings began in 1880, but the most troublesome sore spot most likely was—finances. Many of the earlier problems facing the board can only be as-



E. ROSS HANSON
Board president now

sumed, however, until 1917, because incomplete or even non-existent records were kept until Clarence Vliet became superintendent of schools.

RECORDS ARE sketchy on the board's action, and except for newspaper clippings in 1931 through 1935, no written accounts of the board's action are available.

The Board of 1935 faced serious financial dilemmas in February, when treasurer John H. Roese proposed the issuance of \$20,000 worth of scrip in lieu of cash to school employees. Although the suggestion stirred a big controversy in the town, the measure was passed in order to keep the schools open a full nine months, hoping to end the year with a \$41,500 deficit.

The crisis was perpetuated because the board had succeeded in collecting only 40 per cent of its taxes and no additional state aid was received because the schools' ended the previous year \$52,000 in the red.

ALTHOUGH SUPT. of Schools Charles W. Crandell and Ray A. Palmer, president of the board, wanted to depart from the original school calendar and shorten the school year to alleviate the finan-

cial burden, Birmingham residents felt that this action was "not wise."

Said a resident, Frank C. Newell of Lake Park Drive:

"The schools are Birmingham's greatest asset and if you close your schools, you won't collect taxes, because property won't be worth anything."

The issuance of scrip and the abandonment of a "strictly cash" policy also caused the resignation of the board's publicity director who led the tax stimulation campaign, Charles S. Kinnison.

Clippings from The Birmingham Eccentric show the board's campaign to get the people to pay taxes—and they were successful! In less than two weeks five more per cent, or 45 per cent, of city taxes were paid. Within the next six days, levies totalled slightly more than an additional one per cent.

THE STATE LOAN BOARD in Lansing came to Birmingham's rescue in April of 1935 when they approved a \$20,000 loan that would keep the schools open until June, cancel the scrip pay, and help pay the bills.

Board of Education presidents have included: 1916-1918: R. J. Coryell; 1918 to 1920: W. C. Har-