B’ham Schools Old As ‘Hill’

By DICK ZEMMIN
Staff Writer

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 needs of the community.

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 14,150 students. Birmingham received the need for public education while Michigan was yet a territory. A log schoolhouse was erected on the farm of Dr. Ziba Swan in 1822 near the present intersection of Woodward and Queenston.

THIRD SCHOOL, with Capt. Harvey Taylor in attendance, was not a public institution, but was supported by subscriptions per capita of parents. In 1834, in accordance with law, a public school was established.

AGNES PARKS

Hill School teacher in 1841

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

The first school district was opened early that year in the old log house of John Hamilton at Hamilton and Woodbridge. The front of the frame house was used as a classroom. Rev. Lemuel M. Parkide was the teacher in the winter of 1854-55.

Within five years a frame building was built on the northwest corner of what is now the Chester-W. Maple intersect.

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

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 $2 a term and there were three terms. David Bennett was principal and the entire staff consisted of four teachers. The upper floors of the new building housed the high school.

Principal Beazell received a salary of $150 a year, and his assistant teachers paid $75 a week. Birmingham’s first graduating class was in 1868. Ten years later, the student body had increased to 317 with 94 in the high school.

In 1894, with F. W. Waldo as superintendent, the school received recognition from the University of Michigan. In 1905 Birmingham’s first high school, consisting of 364 pupils in the system and by 1930, its pupils were 432.

THE HILL BUILDING was no longer adequate to accommodate both grade and high school children and Birmingham High was built in 1918. The school system by this time had 738 students and 24 teachers.

At this time, the school operated under the “3-3-3-3” plan and the entire course of study was reorganized. The “3-3-3-3” plan had students spend the first five years in elementary school, the 7-8 grades in junior high and the 9-10 grades in high schools.

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

Three elementary schools were added in quick succession: Adair in 1921, when total enrollment reached 1,053; Plateau in, 1924, Barroom was enlarged in 1924 and 291; and Quanton was constructed in 1927 with an enrollment of 2,300 in the system.

BY 1930, Birmingham schools had a capacity of 3,338 and an enrollment of 2,061. But the population skyrocketed and in 1946, enrollment climbed to 11,914.

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

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

The construction of Birmingham High, now Beaumount, was completed in 1962 and Baldwin was made into an elementary institution. Birmingham High took in 1,220 students in grades 9-12.

APPROXIMATELY 35 new students per day arrived in the Birmingham school district in 1968 and the increased enrollment throughout the fifteen resulted in a rapid school-building program.

The two new schools, North and N. E. Lake, Midvale, Pembroke and Valleyview elementary schools were added as well as Derby Junior High, which was finished in 1968. The program was climax with the completion of Groves Junior-Senior High in 1969.

Beaverly elementary became over-crowded in 1963 and Beverly Junior High, the newest of the schools, was erected in 1960. This move changed Groves into a fall senior high, Westchester Elementary was completed in 1967.

A high quality teaching staff had kept average 22.7 per cent with M.A. or higher degrees in 1962-63 and an annual expenditure that about $34 million in 1962-63 helps keep Birmingham’s school system as one of the best in the state.

BIGBLOW WAS FIRST WEST POINT GRAD

A Boy’s Life in Birmingham 58 Years Ago

Mortimer C. Bigelow, Birmingham’s first West Point graduate, held many boyhood memories of his home town, from which he served as a cadet in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Yellows in Wyo. in 1868.

Dated February 19, a letter written by the son of John Allen Bigelow who was a prominent business and civic leader, as a valuable pictorial picture of a boy’s life in Birmingham more than 85 years ago.

The explanatory words were added to the original letter, added for the enlightenment of present-day readers.

THE BIRMINGHAM “As I remember it was a clean little village, everywhere, dependent only on itself. Our wants were few and those few were easily supplied within our immediate sur-

The big world outside passed us by and we noted it not. We ventured out into the world on the arm of our mother and father. The world was 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 into one of the horses (which stood on E. Maple, east of the present Briggs Building) and played upon his horn whatever he wanted to hear. At night, the army Revellie, calling members of the village band to make music, made to play “No. 4, in the other book.”

THAT ABOULT half past nine, the lights in the storehouses began to go out. Nearly everyone was getting ready to go to bed and dear. The owner of a hardware store on Woodward avenue (our only store, now is) would come along up the street and light the street lamps on his way home from the store.

That was a sign that Birmingham was asleep and the melancholy days of September came. We would take our book and turn the page and turn the page and turn the page... until we were tired and came down through the bushes, he would find a pair of a poor duck.

We might be able to shoot one of them and the little "missle" would have to go to the south alone. It was going to be a wild day.

LATER on the snow came and we knew that no one ever had such a hard time as we did, shoveling the snow off the north and south walk ways. (The Bigelow lived on the northwest corner of W. Maple and Bates, where Jacob’s Inn, is now located).

But then there was ice on the mill pond. The smooth ice skates were prime and Mac Mainzer would go as high as 77 a piece for them. Then still later, we began to go out on the south side of the farm in the chicken yard and watch the snow falling as it became more and more on its way journey.

A warm day gave our youthful optimistic spirit grounds for sitting gloriously to father at supper

MORTIMER BIGELOW Lived in early Birmingham