

Old school in its last days

(by Linda Dillman, staff writer - January 05, 2008)

Four stately columns frame the face of historic Hamilton Township High School, but in less than two years, a multi-million dollar construction project will replace a high school for the third time in the district's history. As a new building rises along Rathmell Road in Obetz, the old school facing Lockbourne Road, which features a brick-faced structure connected to a more modern addition, counts down the days until bulldozers erase the remains of the hybrid late-1930s/early 1960s-era school in the summer of 2009.

Origins In 1939, the \$230,000 school building, financed by the Public Works Administration, a New Deal program created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was hailed as one of the most modern and completely equipped for smaller school districts in Ohio. It replaced the previous "Miner" (also known as Rees) high school located on Rohr Road, which was built in 1918 when Hamilton Township outgrew its first four-year building in Lockbourne. The Miner complex now houses apartments and the Lockbourne structure is home to a local Masonic Lodge. A small, one-room school building, constructed in the early 1900s and known as the Walnut Hill School because of its proximity to the Walnut Hill Methodist Church and located at the corner of Lockbourne and Walnut Hill (Rathmell) roads, was used as the construction office for the high school project and later torn down.

Building features District representatives in the 1930s said the new high school, educating students in grades 8-12, housed one of the most complete industrial arts departments in the state. Principal William Faller, who also served at the Miner building, said the department was equipped for instruction in automotive work, gas and electric welding, foundry, woodworking, printing, and art metal working. A first-of-its-kind photography darkroom was included in the design, which was a new concept for high schools at the time, as was a first-floor general science lab. Programming for young women included a home economics department featuring a "cooking" laboratory with four electric stoves, sewing and dining rooms, and a bedroom where girls were taught housework and basic nursing. The 500-seat auditorium served double duty as a performance space and gymnasium for the 230 students enrolled in the high school. However, in looking to the future, the district built the new structure to accommodate 500 students, when another grade was added to the

curriculum.

Growth With the construction of Lockbourne Air Force Base, later Rickenbacker Air Force Base, and the influx of military families into the local area, student enrollment pushed past the 600 mark by 1959. A million-dollar addition-housing a dedicated gymnasium space; classrooms; science, home economics, industrial arts, and printing labs; offices; and a full-service cafeteria-was built in 1962. In the mid-1940s, Hamilton Township was the third largest district in Franklin County, only lagging in number behind Worthington and Grove City. At its peak, when the air base was at its most active level, approximately 4,000 students went to Hamilton schools. Elementary students attended school on base, at Hamilton South (1956); in Obetz, at the Obetz Junction School (1923); and at Hamilton Central on Rathmell Road, which opened in 1953 and closed in 2006 when it was razed to make way for the new high school building. An elementary school was constructed in Shadeville in 1854. Originally a one-floor structure, a second story was added in 1880. There was no indoor plumbing or running water and students recall bringing their own drinking water to school when an outdoor pump froze up in the winter. The school closed in 1953 when the Central building opened.

Highlights

- Public education was not always free and according to the district's General Rules of 1902, high school tuition was \$1.50 a month, payable in advance to the township clerk.
- Portions of the 1985 movie "Mischief," set in Ohio in 1956 and starring Doug McKeon, Jamie Gertz, Mary Catherine Stewart, and Kelly Preston, were filmed in Hamilton's 1939-era gymnasium and classrooms. Movie trucks and costume trailers lined the parking lot in front of the school while technical crews and actors worked inside.
- On Nov. 5, 1991, the driveway in front of the building was renamed "George R. Cole Drive" in honor of the retired teacher and principal who ended his 40-year career in the same district where he began his primary education.
- The Rathmell Road corridor has hosted a series of school buildings starting prior to 1856, when a one-room structure was indicated on a map on the east side of Parsons Avenue and south of Rathmell and located on a farm owned by Dr. Jeremiah Clark/John Thompson. A new schoolhouse was

shown on 1872 and 1895 maps near the same locale.

- A new middle school, initially for grades seven and eight, opened in 1969. The district ushered in the 21st century with a centralized, campus-style setting on Parsons Avenue-housing an intermediate building; a new elementary, consolidating the South and Central buildings in 2007; and another middle school, replacing the Rathmell Road complex, when classes returned on Jan. 1, 2008.

- Belt-tightening is not a new phenomenon for school districts and Hamilton Township encountered its fair share of budget reductions, especially during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Teachers' salaries were reduced by 10 percent in 1931. A year later, the salaries for bus drivers were also reduced and everyone was placed on a four-month contract.

- After Jan. 1, 1933, the Hamilton Township school board reserved the right to continue school as long as funds were available and at such salaries as the board deemed necessary to keep within its resources.

The future Seventy five years later, concrete blocks, mortar, and bricks are forming the backbone of a new \$25 million, 123,381-square-foot high school, which is scheduled to welcome students at the start of the 2009-10 term. The exterior of the new building will look very similar to the present school, with six Ionic columns and a new cupola. The cupola that now sits on top of the 1939 building will be salvaged and is a prominent artifact in the activities entrance to the commons area, which will also feature a 53 x 8 foot high mural honoring the township and school district's history, along with a circular arched staircase leading to upstairs classrooms and a media center.

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