



A GROUP OF 1935 CLASSMATES at Norcatatur in front of the school when they were in seventh grade: (from left) Junior Smith, Elva Bell, Rena Ward, Miss Hoomivion, Lucille Sullivan, Evelyn Foley and Frank Ward.

Norcatatur graduates from 75 years ago to return

By MARY LOU OLSON
ml.olson@nwkansan.com

Alumni of Norcatatur Rural High School – the last of them graduated 40 years ago – will flock to their old home town on Memorial Day weekend for the alumni banquet, held every five years in the former school building.

The banquet will begin at 6 p.m. in the Norcatatur High School gym, catered by the Norcatatur Bar and Grill. Association officers are Beverly Ritter Miller, Norton, president; Joe Dawson, Norcatatur, vice president; and Dennis Leichliter, Clayton, secretary-treasurer.

The Norcatatur Alumni Association was organized in 1922 to help members keep in touch with “the progress of the school,” according to information in the Norcatatur Centennial History, edited in 1986 by Ron Temple and Sharon Schulze. Originally, the banquet was held every year to honor the graduating class with appropriate initiation ceremonies. Since the school closed in 1970, five-year banquets have been held.

Fay Betts was toastmaster for the 1931 banquet and Ruth Cleland gave the welcome. Others participating included Ruth Davis, Celia Mavity, Joyce Tolle, Dale Dixon, Oral Brunk, Glenn Deeter, Helen Cleland and Superintendent Forrest Dennen.

Officers elected that year were Marion Ward, president; Helen Cleland, vice president; Delia Mavity, secretary; and Howard Benton, treasurer.

The association became inactive during the depression years of the “Dirty 30s,” but in the 1950s, pushed by Patty Eicher Butler, the reunions resumed. In the years before the school closed, average attendance exceeded 400.

The banquet drew a record crowd of 488 in 1970, the last year the high school operated. Mrs. Bob Montgomery was president. Officers elected were Mrs. Frank Ward, president; Mrs. Dewaine Stapp, vice president; and Mrs. Gale Schulze, secretary-treasurer.

The first high school class to graduate at Norcatatur was in 1919. The largest, 1940, will celebrate its 70th anniversary this year.

Two members of the 1935 class, Crystal Brunk Johnson-Moore of Oberlin and Frank Ward of Norton, plan to attend the banquet on the 75th anniversary of their class.

“Things were much different when we went to high school in the 1930s,” said Mr. Ward. “We had no money and our entertainment was listening to *Amos and Andy* and *Fiber McGee and Molly* on the radio. I remember when Dad was taking me to school, we often had to stop and wait for the dust to clear so we could



Crystal Brunk Johnson-Moore

see where we were going.

“Our family lived on a farm east of Norcatatur. Our class started high school with 18 and there were 12 when we graduated. I played basketball, and we were in the Prairie Dog League, which also included Jennings, Clayton, Selden and Rexford. Our superintendent doubled as the basketball coach, and we won the league championship our senior year.”

After completing grade school at a rural school southwest of Norcatatur, Mrs. Moore said she rode to high school with her cousin, Neal Brunk, and his sister Iva. After he graduated, she stayed with an aunt, Florence Auker. She was the mother of Elden Auker, who pitched for the Detroit Tigers and was inducted in the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame in 1969.

“Whether living on the farm or in town, there were chores to take care of after school,” she said. “My job was to fill the wood box with corn cobs for our stoves, and when in town, my aunt always had fancy work for me to do. When there was a baseball game, several of us would hide behind the fence and if a ball came over, we scrambled to get it so we would get a nickel for bringing it back.”

“That paid for an ice cream cone!”

“Entertainment was limited in the 1930s, but we did attend some dances at the Miller building in rural Norcatatur. I remember when the dirt blew so bad at our home, we had to put wet dish towels on the windows to keep out the dust.”

“Forrest Dennen, the superintendent, once told us, ‘It doesn’t matter what kind of clothes you wear, ragged or otherwise; the important thing is that they are clean.’

“Of course, that was a trying job for my mother, who washed all of our clothes with an old-fashioned

hand-pushed washing machine.”

Other members of the 1935 class were Glenn Ankenman, Eveyyn Foley Lyon, Muriel West Christiansen, Margaret Trobee Dickson, Idah Gallentine Gilreath, Hallie Bell Case, Rena Gallentine Garwood, Delmar Clark, Elva Bell McLin, Paul Bishop, Elden Vanover, Iva Brunk Ferguson, Margaret Torrence Donald, Midred Butler Bryan, Hubert Rapp and Junior Smith.

SCHOOL HISTORY

The school census in 1886, when Norcatatur organized as District 45, included 42 children from 5 to 21, according to the centennial history. The first term lasted two months, but by 1887 that was increased to 60 days. In 1905, a four-room, two-story schoolhouse was built with a two-year high school conducted in the upper story. It was called the “City High School.”

In December 1917, that building was ravaged by fire, so classes were held “all over town,” the history book says.

A new brick school was completed in 1918 for \$20,000. The Norcatatur Rural High School was organized in 1921, with plans to increase the high school course to a four-year one. The school grew from an enrollment of 53 during its first year as a rural high school to 87, an increase of more than 60 per cent in three years.

A bond election was held in 1925 and a modern brick building was erected and equipped in 1926 after many a wordy battle. J.W. Deeter, editor of the *Norcatatur Dispatch*, championed the cause, according to a story in the history book.

Cost of the new structure was \$75,000. In the fall of 1952, a \$200,000 grade school was built adjoining the high school so that lunches, music, art, athletics and educational facilities could be combined.

Over the years, Norcatatur Rural High School boasted of outstanding scholastics, sports teams, FFA, ag classes, music, plays and more.

The school was unified with Oberlin in 1968, and the final class to graduate from Norcatatur High School was in 1970. Members were Frank Hillebrand, Mick Miller, Betty Lawson Huff, Terri Miller Kaus, Dennis Molzahn, Brenda Alexander Kaus, Rhonda Carter Jolly, Iris Jackson Bergen, Terry Jackson, Patricia Lawn Beachel and Connie Roe Kasson. Class sponsors were Leroy Harris and Aaron Bates.

Oran and Lavern Milner were honored at one of the alumni banquets for their many years of teaching at Norcatatur.

Some 250 are expected for banquet this year, said Dennis Leichliter.



THE FIRST FRAME SCHOOL at Norcatatur, built in 1905 (above), was destroyed by fire. After a bond election in 1925, a modern brick building (below) was erected to house the first four-year high school in Norcatatur.

