

MVTHS goes through many phases in 108-year legacy

With a first-year enrollment of 160 students in one building, Mt. Vernon Township High School goes through many changes in students, teachers, looks

BY REANNE PALMER
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — With a big decision to start a new “township” high school instead of a “city” high school in 1905, Mt. Vernon Township High School (MVTHS) has grown in all ways over the last 108 years, from number of students and teachers to size of the campus itself to a short stint as a college.

According to information in “History of Jefferson County, Illinois, 1810-1962” by the Continental Historical Bureau and the MVTHS Centennial yearbook, the people of Mt. Vernon Township voted for a new township high school in 1903. A new board was elected for the township school in 1904.

This board purchased a site at Seventh Street and Casey Avenue to erect what was thought to be a building much too big for the area's population. The building, now known as B Building, started being constructed in September 1904 and was completed in July of 1905. It was dedicated on Aug. 15 of that same year. Estimated costs of the building is recorded at \$40,300.

The school replaced the Mt. Vernon City High School, which was held at the Franklin School from 1884 until 1905.

The township high school opened for its first day on Sept. 1, 1905, with James M. Dickson as principal. He had a staff of six teachers with an enrollment of 160 students — 70 boys and 90 girls. The curriculum of the time included academic and science courses with several others, such as stenography, typewriting, manual training and drawing. The class of 1906, the first from the new school, had only 13 members.

Looking at B Building now, one might not know that a cupola was placed at the top, much like the ones found on the top of churches; however, it blew off in 1911 after a violent storm.

Principal Dickson retired in 1915, and was succeeded by Silas Echols. Echols had been one of the six original teachers in 1905. During those 10 years, the enrollment at MVTHS grew to 260 students with 36 graduating in 1916.

Though the school saw a boost in enrollment, it declined in 1917 and 1918 during World War I, in which 110 graduates or former students served in the armed forces; however, increased enrollment after the war led to the addition of the second building, C Building. It was completed in 1921.

The school started a newspaper, called the Orange and Black in 1920. The newspaper is now called the Vernois News. That same year, the Rams basketball team won their first state championship title.

The Vernois Field was built and dedicated in 1933.

By 1935, enrollment had more than tripled to 503 students, forcing township residents to start erecting new structures to fit all the students. An auditorium, gymnasium and classroom building — Buildings E, D and A respectively — were built in 1936 and 1937, more than doubling the size of the campus.

“When the U. S. entered World War II, the high school participated in many patriotic activities and sold thousands of dollars worth of bonds and stamps. School shops were expanded and equipped with machines from the old NYA buildings and adult courses

were organized to train machinists, welders and blue print readers, who were much in demand,” states information from “History of Jefferson County, Illinois, 1810-1962” by the Continental Historical Bureau. “To supplement the food supply, the school operated a summer cannery at the NYA camp. The output of this was more than 75,000 cans per year.”

More than 500 former students and graduated served in WWII, of these a total of 65 were killed or died in service.

It was recorded as a sad day when Principal Echols retired after 42 years with MVTHS in 1947. In total, he served for 10 years as a teacher in the schools and 32 years as principal.

During these 42 years, he saw the school's enrollment jump from 160 to 1,300 and the faculty increase from six to 48. The school itself had grown from one building to five with a value of \$900,000. Bonds in the amount of \$250,000 had been approved for a new vocational building, but it did not begin until 1949 after the war ended.

Curriculum also broadened during this time to include many vocational and cultural courses, such as industrial arts, agriculture, homemaking, business education, art and music. In vocational training, several courses were available, such as drafting, machine shop, electricity and auto shop.

THE SECOND 50 YEARS

Robert McConnell succeeded Echols as principal, coming to MVTHS from Anna-Joneboro and Harrisburg high schools, but only stayed for three years before resigning in June of 1950.

During his term, additional funds were approved for a

new vocational building, which was erected and opened in 1949 and 1950 respectively.

Unlike with a city high school, the township high school could expand its area to include territory not in the township's limits. New territory was taken into the district, growing from 36 square miles to 272 square miles in the 1950s. Buses were then hired to bring students to the school.

In 1950, Arthur Milward became the next principal. Under him, the school added office occupations, distributive education and diversified occupants curriculum. F Building was also erected and opened.

On Oct. 21 and 22, 1955, the school celebrated its 50th anniversary with a series of class reunions and banquets, bringing more than 450 graduates and friends to the school. Echols was reportedly an honored guest and contributions set up a scholarship fund to be called the Silas Echols

Scholarship Fund.

Only a few days later, on Oct. 29, 1955, the voters of the district approved the establishment of a junior college, changing the school's name to Mt. Vernon Township High School and Community College.

“College work began in 1956 with 116 enrolled in day classes and 79 in night classes. The classes met in the school building and in apartments nearby. In 1961, a home was purchased to be the college office. Before the college opened, about 22 percent of MVTHS grads went to college. That jumped to about 50 percent in 1961,” states information from “History of Jefferson County, Illinois, 1810-1962” by the Continental Historical Bureau.

Also in 1961, Milward retired, being succeeded by Eltis Henson. Under Henson, the college opened a practical nursing degree in a house near the campus. By his second year, in 1962, enrollment was 1,635 and teachers num-

bered 80. Archie Woodrome followed Henson as the next principal in the 1960s.

G and H buildings were approved in 1964 and 1978 respectively, bringing the campus to what is seen today.

Some interesting facts mentioned in the Centennial Yearbook include:

- MVTHS's biggest rival in the 1950s was the Benton Rangers;
- In 1971, a fire ravaged the maintenance building, causing more than \$1.3 million in damages and property losses.
- There was a major teachers strike in 1981;
- After the passing of Superintendent Dr. Shields, who served from 1967 to 1988, Vernois Field was renamed J. D. Shields Memorial Stadium;
- Then-First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton, in support of her husband's presidential

campaign, visited the high school in 1996.

NEW SCHOOL UPDATES

As many fondly look back at MVTHS with happy memories and interesting stories, a new, state-of-the-art facility is in the process of being constructed for the students in the fall of 2015.

A referendum was voted upon and approved in April 2011, allowing plans for the new school to begin after a long road of failed referendums in years prior. School officials then began searching for property, narrowing down 10 finalists and finally purchasing 82 acres off Wells Bypass and Ambassador roads on Aug. 29 for \$1.5 million. The school issued bonds in the amount of \$1.5 million to acquire the new land.

The current construction document and bid document

phases will be in the works and bids for the actual construction are expected to be released in October, with groundbreaking beginning, possibly, as soon as September, with January 2014 as the latest to begin moving dirt. The campus is expected to be about 305,000 square feet.

The new facility will also include one unique aspect reminiscent of the current school: an auditorium. School officials and construction managers have said that the new auditorium will be more like a professional theater than like the current structure on South Sixth Street.

As if the new facility and a professional theater weren't enough, the district is also building a Regional Vocational Center on the same land. rpalmer@morningsentinel.com

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