

# Vermillion Public Schools A Heritage Of Success

BY SHAUNA MARLETTE  
shauna.marlette@plaintalk.net

Education has always been a hallmark of the community of Vermillion. Beginning 152 years ago to the month, there has been a public school where the children of Vermillion can attend and receive their education.

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In November 1864, Captain Nelson Miner of the First Dakota Cavalry encouraged the settlers of the area of the importance of education for their children by donating \$30 and the services of his Cavalry men to build the first school. Other settlers volunteered to provide the logs. In one day, the first permanent schoolhouse in Dakota Territory was built.

The school measured 16x20 feet and had walls about 8 feet high. The building soon began serving not only as a place to educate children, but also as a general meeting place. It housed church services, was used as a polling place and was the center for political gatherings.

In 1866 Independence School No. 1 was established and located in Vermillion Township a mile north of town.

John L. Jolley, who taught during the winter term of 1866-67, related among his experiences that "34 pupils were enrolled with 34 different kinds of readers; that of the 34 pupils, nine were women." Pupils brought any readers their parents might have brought with them in their wagons.

During this same time period there would rise many country schools in Clay County.

By 1867, according to a report filed by Superintendent M.S. Burr, there were seven organized and four unorganized districts in the county. Enrollment was 205 children between the ages of 5 and 21.

The original law of 1862 required a term of three months in order for districts to qualify for school funds, but the sessions did not need to be continuous. There was usually a six-week session in late autumn and early winter with a second term of about the same length in the spring and early summer. The fall session would close before the onset of severe winter weather.

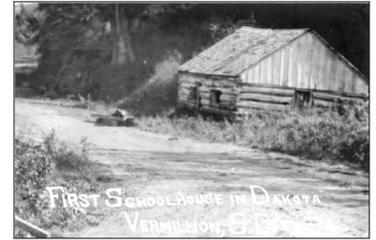
The first attendance law went into effect in 1883, requiring all school children between 10 and 14 years old to attend at least 12 weeks of school. Two years later, the law was amended to require six months of schooling.

By the end of the century, most districts maintained a school year of eight months. The Independent School District in Vermillion was required by law to maintain a nine-month term.

By 1872, the original log cabin school had outlived its usefulness and became a private residence for a family. That same year the community built a new school on Church Street near the bluff that would later become the high school. The following year, 1873, a two-story school building was constructed on Court Street. The school building began as a simple frame structure, but received a brick exterior in 1882. Facilities were also expanded to provide instruction through eighth grade, and ninth grade work became available in 1888.

The Vermillion school system staged its first formal commencement on May 25, 1888. The graduating class was made up of seven girls and four boys.

As the town grew, so did its needs for more schools with West Side Elementary (later called Austin Elementary) constructed on West Main Street in 1897 and East Side Elementary (later called Jolley Elementary) constructed on South University Street in 1902.



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Pictured are the buildings that housed the earliest classes in the Vermillion Public School System. Top Left: 1900 photo of the high school. Bottom Left: The high school built in 1965. Top Right: the log cabin school. Middle Right East Elementary and Bottom Right West Elementary.

1911 was a year of expansion and rebuilding as both the West and East Side Elementary Schools were expanded and the Church Street Building was rebuilt.

For the next ten years the schools in Vermillion would stay the same, until 1921 where additions were added to the Central High School building.

A course of study for junior high students began in 1917 in an old convent building located on High Street, called the North Side School.

In 1920 voters approved a bond to add a wing to the north side of the Vermillion High School building.

From 1921 until 1953 the schools in Vermillion would remain the same, other than renaming East and West Elementary to Jolley and Austin; however, 1953 would see the start of a new building boom to tie in with the baby boom the country was seeing.

## BUILDING BOOM

By 1953 the baby boom in America was causing overcrowding in the community's school, especially at West Side and East Side Schools. That summer an investigative committee found the facilities of both schools to be inadequate. Enrollment records for the district in 1953 show 846 students in the district.

That winter construction plans were finalized with a new Austin Elementary School, to be located at Austin Park, consisting of kindergarten, 10 classrooms and an auditorium would be built and Jolley Elementary receiving a five classroom addition.

The schools opened in the fall of 1955 with enrollment reaching 925 students.

Three years later they both received additions, with the old Jolley School used as the junior high school for the first time.

Enrollment had boomed to 1,019 students.

1965 would be the last year the high school on Church Street would be used and construction on the new High School located on East Main Street would be completed.

In 1970, voters approved the \$1.4 million in bonds needed to build the Vermillion Middle School. Opening in the fall of 1972, the new building would house 800 students in grades 5-8.

## REMODELING FOR THE FUTURE

In 1999, voters approved a \$5.6 million addition to the high school. The addition included a new commons and kitchen area, a new auxiliary gymnasium and a new auditorium.

The middle school has been remodeled since it was constructed as well, moving from an open for education to a more traditional classroom style.

Most recently, the high school underwent and completed a remodel this past summer. The \$5.2 million renovation of Vermillion High School replaced the ceiling and update all lighting fixtures. The entire facility was painted. All asbestos was

removed from the HVAC and plumbing tunnels. The chemistry and biology labs were updated with new plumbing and fixtures. The fire alarm system were updated. Also, all restrooms were updated to meet ADA compliance issues.

According to superintendent Dr. Mark Froke, the remodel "Gives the Vermillion community a new school, without the new school cost," and was necessary due to the aging of the original 50-year-old high school facility.

With a current enrollment of more than 1,200 students it is hard to believe that public schools in Vermillion had its humble beginnings in a log cabin almost exactly 152 years ago.

Currently serving the Clay and Union County communities of Vermillion, Burbank, and Meckling, the Vermillion Public School District encompasses 200 square miles.

The Vermillion School District is governed by a five member school board, and is guided by a district superintendent and four building principals. The district operates one high school (Vermillion High School), one middle school (Vermillion Middle School), and two elementary schools (Jolley and Austin Elementary Schools).



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Prentis Park pool was a popular hang out for generations. In this undated photo you can see it in its original setup.

# Prentis Park: A Place For The People

BY ELYSE BRIGHTMAN  
Elyse.brightman@plaintalk.net

Vermillion has a number of public parks available for its residents, but none more iconic than the widely used Prentis Park.

"That's kind of the jewel park in the city, so everybody pretty much knows where it is and what it has to offer," said Jim Goblirsch, the director of Vermillion Parks and Recreation.

According to the National Register of Historic Places, the land where Prentis now sits was purchased by the city in 1902 "in an attempt to clean up that portion of town."

What is now Prentis Park became an apple orchard,

as part of a nursery, maintained by the Carpenter family for 30 years until 1923, when its namesake purchased part of the land to donate to the city.

"Prentis Park traces its beginning to a ten-acre gift to the city by Charles E. Prentis on November 5, 1923 in memory of his late wife who had recently passed away," says the NRHP.

The purchase included the hiring of a professional landscaper, who drew up the plans for a swimming pool, bandstand and outdoor theatre.

The first pool on the grounds was opened to the public in 1929.

"The vote won by only three ballots and the

pool was constructed for \$22,000," says the NRHP.

Picnic grounds and playground equipment was put in place over the following few years.

Another 10 acres was donated in 1930 from Charles Prentis for the park's current size of 20 acres. The additional space made room for a baseball diamond and football field. The football field was located in the outfield of the baseball diamond and a fence surrounded the entire field. A few years later, dugouts, a grandstand and restrooms were added.

"In 1935, the city was able to buy two additional

1959

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