



Baxter School District Ten

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by
R. Alton Lee

Early settlers along Clarks Creek organized the tenth school district in Morris County, Kansas at the end of the Civil War, in 1865. There were Kickhaefers, Warnakes, and Kneibels from Germany, Olsons and Swensons from Scandinavia, along with British and American settlers, and a sprinkling of other ethnic groups. After the building of the Katy railroad from Junction City to Texas, and the founding of White City along its right-of-way in 1872, Civil War veterans and migrants from Northwestern Europe poured into the area and purchased good farmland from the railroad. They built and supported Baxter school through the years to provide their children with a common school education. The schoolhouse became unique with its happy ending. Most of these buildings eventually rotted away, were converted into homes, or were torn down for their lumber. Baxter was saved and became a museum.¹

The early school employed men who had some normal training as teachers until the twentieth century when young ladies began to dominate this profession. As with similar schools, the district held an annual meeting where a board was elected, composed of a presiding officer, a treasurer, and a clerk. One parent was chosen at this meeting to provide wood, or later to haul coal from the Badger Lumber Company in White City, to heat the building. At the 1892 meeting, patrons approved opening school on 5 September for four months, then a vacation for two months during the worst winter weather, followed by a three-month term beginning 1 March so the children could help with the summer farm work. Bill Tiede was designated the coal hauler for the year. They also agreed to try a female teacher at a salary of \$60 monthly.²

The school building served a variety of purposes for the rural community. During the evenings it hosted dances, dinners, student displays of learning, and other social events. It also served as a polling

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place. The wooden building, with its cedar shingles, was a fire hazard and one night it caught fire and burned. The exact date of this catastrophe could not be determined, but one resident later noted that it occurred after an election one day. The abstract of Ralph Roediger's deed for his pasture indicates the school board bought two acres of this land in March 1910. A new school was built here immediately, located several hundred yards east of Clarks Creek, on the county road connecting White City with Woodbine.

Slate blackboards covered the rear wall with the heating stove dividing that side. A small stage, elevated one step and with a draw curtain, occupied the front. In addition to various-sized desks, there was a teachers desk, a piano, a chronological set of American maps, and a sand box. When the school received a new layer of shingles in 2003, it was discovered that a ten-foot addition had been added on the front for cloak rooms and the stage. This entry supported the bell tower and boys entered the building on the left side, the girls on the right, with shelving and hooks for lunch buckets and for coats and hats. A water pump guarded the front of the building, with a mudscraper, and two outhouses stood some forty yards east of the schoolhouse. Later a lean-to was also added at the rear for storage.

A list of rules of conduct for teachers, ca. 1915, was found in the building. They include:

1. You are not to marry during the term of contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown in ice cream stores.
5. You may not travel beyond the city limits unless you have permission of the school board.
6. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile with any Man unless he is your father or brother.
7. You may not smoke cigarettes.
8. You may not dress in bright colors.
9. You may under no circumstances dye you hair.
10. You must wear two petticoats.
11. Your dress must not be shorter than two inches above the ankle.

12. To keep the schoolroom clean you must:
 - Sweep the floor at least once a day.
 - Scrub the floor at least once a week with soapy water.
 - Clean the blackboard at least once a day.
 - Start the fire at 7 am so the room will be warm by 8 am.

The school closed its doors to students after World War II. Joann Scott was one of its last teachers. By that time the old coal burning stove was replaced by one using propane, making her early morning burden a little lighter. She recalled having a dozen students scattered over six grades. The students bought their own texts, work books, and other supplies. She had a regular schedule for the classes with physical education, music, and art interspersed. In good weather, the two recesses and lunch time could be held outdoors where children enjoyed playing blackman, snow games during season, and softball almost year-round. She recalled one student who was difficult to get close to because he always needed a bath or some kind of de-odorizing. All the parents, Mrs. Scott recalled, were most supportive.³

A Baxter student had fond memories of traveling to school either with neighboring children or her father or, best of all when it snowed, by a pony pulling a sleigh. She also recalled a coyote following her home one day. It scared her because, although it never came close, when she ran it ran, and when she stopped, it stopped. Another time a large bull snake “chased” her and she ran a mile before stopping. She called her mother a “fabulous lunch-packer” because it invariably contained a sandwich, some fruit, and a dessert, with an orange constituting a real treat.⁴

The Katy Park committee in White City obtained possession of Baxter School and it was moved onto the park in 2002. The building was in good shape and the committee had little to do to renovate it and make it into a museum. A sufficient number of desks and parts were found in the lean-to to assemble and restore a dozen of them in all sizes. A new roof was installed, the building was given a good paint job, and a new bell tower replaced the original that was lost. The Eureka Valley school in Riley County, Kansas, had been destroyed by high winds, but its bell tower remained intact. The Riley County Historical Society graciously donated it to Baxter School and the tower was mounted

before painting and shingling took place. White City High School alumni, scattered throughout the world, generously contributed funds to buy paint and materials and to become “square families” by purchasing squares of shingles. Voluntary labor restored the building to its former glory. The original siding was retained with all the dozens of names and initials carved on the back wall (where the teacher could not see the boys during recess.) The school now stands ready for visitors to view a rural country school as it appeared a century earlier, preparing farm children for life and/or high school. Interested visitors should contact City Hall for viewing.

Footnotes

¹ See R. Alton Lee, T-Town on the Plains (Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 1999) for the establishment and growth of White City and its surrounding vicinity.

² Annual school meeting minutes, 1892. These minutes are at the White City public library. There is voluminous scholarly material on the country, or rural, schools. See especially Minnie Davisson Baringer, “A Kansas Rural School During the 1890s,” *Heritage of Kansas*, 7 (1963), and Joanne McBain “Learning and the One-Room School,” *Heritage of the Great Plains*, 22 (winter 1989).

³ Interview, Manhattan, Kansas, 10 June 2009.

⁴ *Manhattan Mercury*, 24 May 2009.