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### Rhinelanders Revisited: A brief history of the School District of Rhinelanders

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River News Features reporter

Crisp fall air signals the turning of leaves, and with that, the start of a new school year. The School District of Rhinelanders has played a central role in our community since its commencement, but that landscape has changed considerably since Rhinelanders' birth in 1882.

In the pioneering days of the Northwoods, there was no organized education system - where the lumbermen went, their families followed, at which time schools were established for their children, then later abandoned as lumber was exhausted and families moved elsewhere.

But as the demand for forestry products grew and the mushrooming city of Rhinelanders expanded, rural schoolhouses serving small logging communities sprang up all along the countryside at the turn of the 20th century.

At the time, it was common for fathers with many children to build one-room schoolhouses near their home; just one example among many being Ferndale (Lassig) School in the town of Pelican. At one time in Pine Lake alone, there were seven rural schoolhouses in addition to those in Newbold, Crescent, Cassian, Woodboro, Starks and Parrish.

These one-room schoolhouses hosted several grades in one room taught by a single teacher, and lessons went beyond the typical curriculum of reading and writing - it was common for students to walk miles to school, take turns filling the stove with wood during the wintertime and haul water from the nearby pump.

Young women and men who taught in these one-room rural schoolhouses were often trained at the Oneida County Normal School, such as local Ralph Larson's mother.

The Normal School was established in 1910 with the help of Anderson Brown, who was nicknamed the "father of Rhinelanders," pioneering businessman Arthur Taylor and F. A. Lowell, Oneida County Superintendent of Schools.

Prior to the founding of the Normal School, Rhinelanders' first settler John Curran established his home as well as a trading post at the junction of the Pelican and Wisconsin rivers in 1855, near the location of Friendly Village today. In 1880, Curran was credited with building the first one-room school in what is now the city of Rhinelanders, where he served the basic educational needs of his own children as well as neighboring Chippewa Indian children.



McCord School's fourth-grade class of 1943 is photographed in front of the school building which faced Mason Street. Elementary students from Rhinelanders' northside attended McCord School from 1888-1981, including Ralph Larson who is pictured here among his peers. Photo courtesy of Ralph Larson.

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The first official school board meeting was held in 1883, one year after the village of Rhinelanders was established. Plans were approved for building a one-room schoolhouse at the corner of Brown and Frederick streets, where the fire and police department stand today. Curran was elected the first clerk of the board of education and this school in the heart of Rhinelanders was named in his honor.

By 1885, the school wasn't adequate enough to house the growing population of school-age children. It was moved to the opposite side of Frederick Street and became a private dwelling, while the new three-room facility (also named Curran School) erected at that site was moved near the intersection of Oneida Avenue and King Street just three years later. That building burned in 1932 and was replaced by the present Curran School building, which now houses offices and is known as Curran Professional Park.

In the vacant lot on Brown and Frederick, Central School was constructed in 1889 with an addition in 1898, and included a three-year high school course which expanded to four years in 1894. In 1939, this school was replaced with a modern facility at the corner of N. Pelham and Harvey streets and was known as "New Central," which housed students through the sixth grade.

By 1888, a one-room school on the west side was constructed to serve the children of families working at Buttrick Sawmill, which was located at the bend where Maple Street turns into River Street. Buttrick School, as it was known, was located on Gardner Street and initially included only first and second grades. But by 1923, the number of families in the area increased, so a larger four-room brick school was built at the corner of Maple and Phillips. This building became the southern half of West Side School (which still stands today as an apartment building), while a second edition was completed in 1939 to include more classrooms, a library, teachers' offices and an auditorium.

A two-room school on the north side was also constructed in 1888 near the Boom Lake sawmills, an area of town which witnessed the largest and fastest growing population in Rhinelanders' early years. The school was originally known as First Ward School, then later McCord School in honor of congressman M.H. McCord, who helped Rhinelanders schools receive grant funding. But in 1905, McCord School was lost to a catastrophic fire that wreaked havoc on the north side of town, burning the school in addition to two churches, hundreds of logs piled up along the railroad and several homes. When McCord first opened again in 1906, northside elementary students were welcomed back into an eight-room brick building with indoor plumbing but no electricity.

Despite its name as McCord School, a sign reading "First Ward School" appeared on the facade of the building when it reopened in 1906 and remained there until 1981 when the school closed. The sign can still be seen at the corner of Thayer and Madison streets. That area now houses the Phoenix Villa Apartments in addition to the Rhinelanders Area Community Garden. Volunteers at the Community Garden have reported finding marbles and other small treasures hidden in the sandy soil that was once the school's playground.

In 1893, four-room South Park School was built on Arbutus Street. Concerns over fire hazards prompted the new South Park School to be built in 1952 at the location of the YMCA of the Northwoods' new Youth Development Center on the corner of Kennan and S. Pelham streets, at which time it housed kindergarten through sixth grade.

St. Mary's Catholic Church was first organized in 1883 and an associated school on Conro Street (where the present rectory now stands) was dedicated in 1900. St. Mary's School was originally staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity from Manitowoc, who taught all eight grades.

But because there was a language barrier for a number of Polish families who did not understand English during church services at St. Mary's, St. Joseph's Parish (known as "The Little Polish Church") was established in 1909 on Stevens Street.

A separate church and school was built for St. Joseph's in 1957 on N. Stevens Street with an enrollment of about 200 students from first through eighth grade. In 1969, St. Mary's and St. Joseph's consolidated into Rhinelanders Catholic Central (RCC). The name was changed to Nativity of Our Lord Catholic School in January of 2005.

In 1888, Zion Evangelical Lutheran opened its first church on Mason Street, but it was lost to the destructive 1905 north side fire. That same year, however, a new church was erected on N. Stevens Street. Zion Christian Day School first opened in 1898, but was discontinued after only one year due to insufficient support. The third and present Zion Lutheran Church on Brown Street was dedicated in 1929. In 1931, the church on Stevens Street was remodeled into a two-room school (and still stands as an apartment building today), which opened for the fall term that same year. By 1950, groundbreaking for the current Zion Lutheran School began on W. Frederick Street, where it still stands today.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church was another parochial school in the Rhinelanders area located on Monico Street, whose associated school was established in 1947.

Rhinelanders' first junior high and high school began in the Old Central School building at the corner of Frederick and Brown. A new school for high school students was built in 1912 on top of Sarocka Hill on E. Frederick Street and the junior high students remained at the Brown/Frederick street location until 1959. At the time, junior high consisted of grades seven through nine while high school contained grades 10 through 12.

By the '50s, a master plan developed by the Oneida County School Committee called for the establishment of a common school district, at which time the reorganization of the school district became an important topic.

The first meeting of the Rhinelanders Union High School District was held in 1955, where Cedric Vig was appointed the Rhinelanders Union school administrator and the Hodag was selected to be the official school mascot (although the Hodag had already been associated with the school's sports teams for decades prior). In



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1956, a bond referendum was approved to authorize the building of a new high school on Coolidge Avenue, and pupils moved into the new Rhinelanders Union High School (RUHS) building in 1959.

An integrated K-12 School District of Rhinelanders was created in 1968. The area for the new district consisted of the City of Rhinelanders and the Towns of Cassian, Crescent, Newbold, Pelican, Pine Lake, Stella, Woodboro, Parrish as well as a portion of the Town of Harrison in Lincoln County.

The reorganized district hosted 13 buildings within its boundaries, with elementary schools located in Cassian, Crescent, Newbold, Pelican, Pine Lake and Stella. The city K-6 schools were Curran, South Park, West, McCord and Central. Seventh and eighth grade were housed in the old high school building on Sarocka Hill, grades 9-12 were located in the high school facility and the Rhinelanders Vocational School was housed at the Brown/Frederick location. Since many of the rural schoolhouses didn't provide kindergarten because many mothers stayed at home prior to the '70s, one of the first acts of the K-12 board was to provide kindergarten opportunities for all district students.

Nicolet College and Technical Institute, as it was known in 1968 when operations first began, served the post-secondary education needs of Forest, Oneida and Vilas counties in addition to portions of Iron, Langlade and Lincoln counties. In just a few short years the institution expanded considerably, offering 25 vocational and technical programs in addition to collegiate transfer programs as part of a "dual track" system.

In 1974, a new junior high school was built at its present location on Acacia Lane. It was named in honor of James (Jim) Williams, who served as principal for 41 years prior to its dedication and was well known for his contributions to our community.

Through the years, comprehensive facilities and school curricula beyond the basic subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic were added, and later on, more diverse and technology-oriented subjects were included as well. But as our community witnessed a decrease in the school-aged population at the turn of this century, Newbold, Pine Lake, West and Curran elementary schools closed in 2005.

Many scholarship programs have also been available for college-bound students over the years. In 1951, Stunt Night began as an amateur talent show presented by the Rhinelanders Parent-Teachers Association of public schools and St. Mary's Home and School Association. Profits collected from the fundraiser went to the Teachers Memorial Scholarship Fund, which was originally established in memory of two faculty members, sisters, who died tragically in 1949.

Hundreds of parents and volunteers from each of the schools in the district worked concertedly to prepare skits performed in the high school auditorium, which drew an extraordinary crowd.

The program ran strong until 1968 when the last Stunt Night was performed, but it was evident there was a need to continue the scholarship program, the outgrowth of which was dubbed "Dollars for Scholars." Through the years, several different scholarship funds have been established for the same reasons, and in 1991, the Rhinelanders Area Scholarship Fund (RASAF) was established to raise money and contribute scholarships to Rhinelanders area students.

For generations, Rhinelanders residents have generously contributed to the continued success of our school district and its students. Although this school year feels unlike any other that has preceded it, it's reassuring to recognize that our schools have successfully overcome change in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Much of the information in this article was collected from "A History of the School District of Rhinelanders," published during the city's centennial in 1982. A special thanks to those authors and contributors, in addition to Bill Vancos of the Rhinelanders Historical Society, former Pine Lake school teacher Pauline Doucette and many locals who have taken the time to share their stories with me.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series. Visit [www.rivernewsonline.com](http://www.rivernewsonline.com) to read the previous installments.

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