

The Story of Altar Valley School District

This little school district, Altar Valley School District, which lies 25 miles southwest of Tucson on the Ajo Road to Sells boasts an amazing history of tenacity through periods of hard times. Prior to 1929, the only school in the area was an accommodation school in the Sierrita Mountains on the Soto Ranch, established by the county superintendent to help the families of the ranch get its ten children into school.

One of the rooms at the ranch house was prepared, a teacher hired and school commenced, the teacher left in the middle of the first year and a Mrs. Mary McGowan took her place. Mrs. McGowan lived at the ranch and took in her care during the week a little girl, named Frances, whose home was at the Three Points Store. Six of the ranch children and Frances attended school during the day then in the evening two older boys, 21 and 22 were taught for an hour. Most every evening at this time the rest of the children came to school to read library books as the lights were much better at the school than home. For all this Mrs. McGowan was paid \$150.00 a month in salary and \$10 a month for keeping little Frances. The year was 1928.

1929 found Mrs. McGowan once again ringing the school bell on the Soto Ranch. The county Superintendent arranged for a cow to be fed so the children would have good milk at the school. The student population did not change until Christmastime when a new family moved in four miles north of Ajo Road. They had 4 children who needed to be in school and Soto's school was the only one near. There were also another 4 children ready for school. Because there was no one to transport them, Mrs. McGowan gave up the evening class and drove back and forth from a home she had on Ajo Road, taking 8 children with her in her car. For this she was paid .50 a day for each child. The trip encompassed 56 miles a day with only 14 miles of actual highway and a new road had yet to be built from Sasabe Road to the Soto Ranch back in the Sierrita Mountains. Teacher and pupils bumped along for ten miles following a trail made by horses and wagons. Near the school was a large sand wash and when it rained in the Sierrita Mountains the road was covered deep with sand. On these mornings the boys from the ranch would meet the car with horses and ropes, hitch on and pull the car over the bad places in time for classes to begin. It was in this fashion that school continued until the spring of 1930. There were enough people with children in Three Points by then that they decided to form a district and have their own school.

That first year was difficult with a loss of 10 children and Mrs. McGowan leaving to teach in Tucson in 1931. Despite the loss of students and teachers, the Three Points School District was organized and a school board selected. But ill fate still beleaguered the struggling little school, for that same summer a wind storm passed through the district and took the roof off the school house and destroyed most of the school books. While the school was being repaired, another room was added. Things also began looking up in the fall of 1930, when the federal government not only paid for their education but also required a hot lunch program. According to one early teacher, Mrs. Emma Townsend, this hot lunch program consisted of cooking a pot of pinto beans every day.

In 1934, a new school house was built with the help of federal money and the work done by the W.P.A. So encouraged were the people of the district by the progress of the school that with the help of the county some 200 trees were planted on the school grounds. The county agent brought a bucket of rocks and threw them in the air, saying that trees were to be planted where the rocks fell as nature never planted in a straight row. However, even this gallant gesture to improve the school grounds failed, for

the young man left in charge of watering the trees over the summer neglected his duties and all the trees died.

In 1938, 35 children attended the Three Points School. They came from surrounding ranches such as Ferguson, Robles, Tortuga, Soto and mines such as Banner, Big Johnnie, and Yellow Bird. However, by 1940 enrollment took such a drastic plunge that school had to be closed for a year. 1941 saw the school opening again with the return of Mrs. McGowan who had remarried and was now Mrs. Dill. Mrs. Mary Dill remained teaching in the district until her retirement in 1961. At that time the school was enlarged and the name was changed to honor the long-time teacher.

Again in 1954, student numbers plunged to only six students but the school hung on and numbers gradually began to rise. In 1974 there were 101 students and 1979-80 the number soared to 205 students. Portable buildings were brought in to handle the overcrowding, again in 1982 more portable buildings were purchased and by the end of 1986 the number was up to 358. Meetings were held to determine what could be done. Many ideas were brought forward and accepted or rejected. Finally, it was decided to hold a bond election. A middle school, administrative offices, maintenance building and library were built on the main campus. There was not enough money to construct any kind of gymnasium but basketball courts were poured. Eventually, through a grant we were able to enclose the basketball courts.

Enter the 1990's and enrollment continued to climb. More classrooms were needed and the community responded by again passing a bond along with a newly organized State Facilities Board which allowed us to build Robles Elementary in 2004. We had wanted to build a middle school on the new site but the Facilities Board turned it down as there was not enough funding. A metal building was constructed. Superintendent Doug Roe said, "It is not what the building looks like on the outside but it is what is happening inside which counts".

This school has seen many wonderful, successful students pass through our doors. We have seen some amazing teachers who were instrumental in encouraging those students to go on to become teachers, business men and women, members of the military, law enforcement, medical professionals, clergy and just good people.