

History of Corcoran Unified School District

By Harold H. (Hoot) Gibson

Corcoran Elementary

The Kings County Board of Supervisors formed the Corcoran School District from portions of Artesia and Dallas school districts on October 13, 1905. At that time, the Corcoran Junction was only a small pinpoint on the maps of the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe railroads. Although established as a railroad junction, the town owes its existence to pioneer farmers and financiers. One of these men was H.J. Whitley, who organized a real estate company and bought the town site. J.W. Guiberson erected the first building in 1905. School was conducted in a vacant store on Whitley Ave. commencing in January 1906. The classes were moved into another vacant building in about two months. Mrs. L.A. Coe was the first teacher. Trustees were N.J. Coretta, J.R. Miller and T.E. Craighill. The first public school house in Corcoran (pictured above) was built on Van Dorsten Ave. (in what is now John Maroot Park) with building completed in time for the fall semester of 1906. The school building's façade was a large false parapet some referred to as "gingerbread."



First Corcoran School

One teacher was all that was needed for several years, but as the town grew other teachers were added. The new building became too small and three bungalows were added to relieve the congestion.

By 1919, all the buildings had become overcrowded and in 1920 the people voted about \$60,000 in bonds for a new grammar school. The people also voted to erect the new building on the 10-acre site just south of the high school on Letts Ave. School trustees at the time were Ora Strong, Victor Martin and Mrs. C.C. Wilson. At that time, trustees in school districts were all highly involved in the day-to-day administration of the schools, particularly in the design and building of facilities. The plans for the new school were drawn for an "H" type building of eight rooms so that other rooms may be built at a later date and not "mar the looks or unity" of the building. It was built of hollow tile with tile roof and was finished for the opening of school in September 1921. The school housed 276 students in kindergarten to sixth grade with a faculty of seven teachers and Principal E.C. Miller. The building became known as Central School.



Central School – 1930

The Corcoran School District was faced by an enrollment crisis in the mid 1940s. Tensmuir School District had unionized with Corcoran in 1946. The district enrollment had increased from 607 in 1943 to nearly 1,700 in 1948. North School (Fremont) and South School (Mark Twain) had been established with instruction taking place in a collection of cabins, barracks, bungalows and recently built classrooms. Tensmuir teacher Leah Smith taught two years at Tensmuir, but then was moved to Corcoran. She had 46 students her first year at Central School. The following year North School was opened in a barracks building and she became its head teacher. There were double sessions in the three grades and they took the children by bus to Central School for lunch each day. Esther Edes came to Corcoran as a second grade teacher and was greeted by 53 “squirming youngsters” who had been taken from five other overcrowded second grades. Her class was conducted in a small cabin-like room at the back of a large schoolyard. In 1948, she was transferred to south school, which was also on double sessions.

Voters of the elementary school district gave overwhelming approval at a special election held in October 1950 for the expansion of the school building program by authorizing the issuance of \$500,000 in bonds and the acceptance of a loan of \$2,200,000 from the state. Superintendent A.R. Beardsley singled out the Citizens Committee headed by Fred Carroll as a contributor to the largest turn out of voters in the history of the school district. The vote was four to one in favor of the proposals. The money from the bond and state loan was to be used to construct a new seventh and eighth grade school; to replace Central school; to erect a new building at a new site near the Corcoran Airport; to make additions to the Fremont and South schools; and to build a new administration building.



Corcoran Class Photo – 1942

The new building program took off at a rapid pace. The Corcoran Journal reported on May 13, 1951 that the board of trustees had met and accepted bids for the erection of additions to Fremont school for the building of eight classrooms, two kindergartens, one cafetorium and an administrative unit at a cost of \$438,204.85. In approving the contract for the additions to Fremont, the board adopted a revised plan for the enlargement of the entire system. The new plan cut the number of classrooms from 72 to 52 since enrollment had not been as rapid as projected. In addition to the enlargement of Fremont school, the new plan called for the abandonment of the Tensmuir School and for the dropping of the proposed school near the airport. Children from those areas would be bused to South and Central schools, which would be enlarged. The board also approved the working plans for the modern seventh and eighth grade school at an estimated cost of \$647,592. In addition to the school, the board approved going to bid for a district administration office.

The seventh and eighth grade school named John Muir was occupied September 8, 1952. The school was constructed for a contract price of \$590,528.90. The school, located on Letts and Patterson avenues, contained a fully equipped shop, homemaking department, locker rooms, arts and crafts room, and library in addition to the regular classrooms. The seventh and eighth grade students had been under the jurisdiction of the high school since 1918. William Roush was the first principal. The district administration office was constructed on the same site at a contract price of \$47,227.48. The fall semester of 1953 was ushered in with the new Bret Harte School on the same location as Central School. South School was renamed Mark Twain. New classrooms were erected and the two existing wings at the site were remodeled and brought up to code.

The students at John C. Fremont and Mark Twain schools were bused to Bret Harte for lunch. Parents came to board meetings in 1951 and said they were willing to continue double sessions if the board would divert

building funds to construct cafeteriums at Fremont and Mark Twain. Plans were already underway to construct the buildings and the parents were appeased. Trustees in 1950-1951 were Gerald Schwenk, Ralph Gilkey, Jack Polzin, Merval Sawtelle and Grand Squire. The school district superintendent during this phase of development was Albert R. Beardsley.

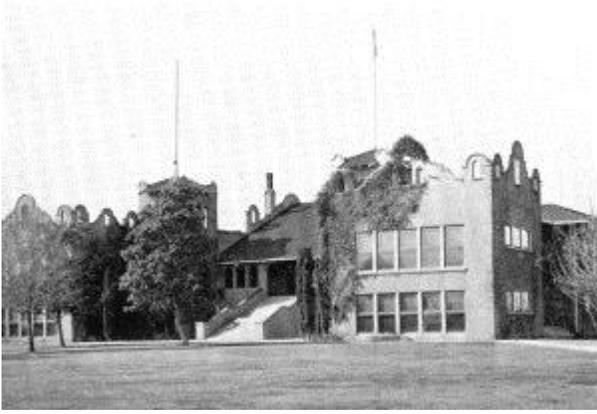
Corcoran High School

The first meeting held to discuss the possibility of establishing a high school in the southeast portion of Kings County was held at the behest of citizens in the Waukena and Artesia school districts in January 1909. The main arguments in favor of a new high school in the area centered around bringing more settlers into the area and increasing the land values. Little Mention was made of the educational and cultural values of such an endeavor. Not to be upstaged by the two districts nearby, the civic-minded leaders of Corcoran scheduled a meeting to discuss establishing a new high school district. The meeting was held at Pickerell Hall in February 1909. In 1912, there were about 400 hardy pioneers living in the Corcoran area. The grammar school had begun several years before but after completing eighth grade, the students had to travel to Tulare if they wished to attend high school.

The 1914 High School Yearbook *El Espejo* (later called the *Harvester*), is hereafter quoted to express the scholarly prose used by the students: "The time is apropos to tell our readers something of the beginnings of our school, particularly since a copy of this first issue of our paper is to be placed in the cornerstone of our new high school building, so that after the decay of centuries future generations may read and judge our strivings toward the culture and the enterprise of the community which has stimulated us. The Corcoran children, after their grammar school days, had been continuing their studies at the Tulare High School. Longheaded businessmen saw no reason why Corcoran should not have a high school of its own. A petition to form a high school district, signed by the townspeople, presented August 12, 1912, to the County Superintendent of Schools, Kings County, was granted. By August 28th of the same year, with the grammar school board composed of Messrs. J.B. Mayer, L.P. Mitchell, and J.A. Firebaugh as high school directors, the school was established. After looking over the town for a suitable domicile, it was decided that in all respects it was better to build a temporary structure. No sooner said than done. On September 16, of this same year, with two teachers, Mr. A.C. Smith as principal, and Miss Grace Wellington-Ackerman as assistant and language teacher, the school was opened in a new, well lighted, well ventilated, well-equipped building adapted for school purposes, and a full curriculum for three years of academic work was offered."

The high school boundaries were the same as the elementary district. On October 5, 1912, a new board of trustees was elected. They were Messr. J.W. Guiberson, F.A. Cleveland, E.N. Johnson and Mesdames J.H. Tennant and Nettie Elliget. It is believe the first high school building was on the northeast corner of Letts and Whitley avenues. Commencement exercises were held for the first graduating class on June 4, 1914. It was composed of Beatrice Vallow, Lulu Hall and Mildred Firebaugh.

On February 19, 1913, a \$45,000 bond issued was passed (78-0) for the construction of a new high school on the 10-acre site south of Whitley Ave. An article in the 1914 *El Espejo* stated: "In spite of the stringency in the money market, but owing to the efficiency, energy and remarkable business acumen of the high school trustees, the bonds were sold on April 10, 1914." Construction started on the new brick building. The fall term signaled the opening of the new high school. A four-year course of student was now offered. There were 40 students of which 15 were freshmen.



1914 High School

The faculty was very qualified scholastically with Principal A.C. "Buck" Smith teaching English, History (medieval and modern), Algebra, Manual Training and Mechanical Drawing; Grace Wellington Ackerman teaching English, French, Latin and Spanish; Wirt C. Williams teaching Chemistry, Physics, Algebra, Physical Geography, U.S. History and Government; Roscoe S. Arnold teaching Bookkeeping, Penmanship, Commercial English and Typewriting; and Amy Waite teaching Cooking, Sewing and Ancient History. The citizens, board members and faculty were said to be building of the future, as they expected several hundred students would eventually be enrolled at the school. Principal Smith wrote in the 1914 yearbook that the policy of the district was "to have the very best instruction, the most approved equipment, the cleanest environment, and the finest building money could obtain.

It seems fitting to quote verbatim from the article written by Mr. Smith to express his ardent pride in the new building: "In exterior appearance and internal arrangement, our new building has a finish and tone rarely found. Ten acres of campus will give ample grounds for agricultural purposes and for tennis courts, ball grounds and a future stadium. It will be the beauty spot of the neighborhood. The completeness of equipment and convenience of arrangement are especially noteworthy. A stereopticon is to be installed and so situated that it can be used for lecture purposes and for civic assemblies without moving of the instrument and to this will be a motion picture attachment.



1920 Students

The windows of the lecture room and laboratories are provided with a specially devised blind to exclude all light readily. The lecture room lies between two science laboratories and can be thrown into the general auditorium. The most perfect laboratory equipment obtainable will be placed there. Some of this is already in use in our temporary quarters. The vacuum cleaner process is to be used for janitor work. A moistened screen will be placed across the air-intake to clean, and moisten the air. Rest room, capacious storerooms, shower and tub baths are provided. Electric stoves and every other up-to-date convenience for Domestic Science, a very complete woodworking outfit including variety and band saws, planer, lathes, grinder, and electric glue pot are on the list of conveniences. An assembly, with a seating capacity of several hundred, a complete stage and dressing rooms, a large and complete commercial department, and an agricultural department with every facility for dairy, soil, and propagation experiments, an art department and facilities for the teaching of music have all been provided and carefully thought out. A library, contiguous to the assembly and convenient to and in full view from the principal's office, is a special feature. A large cement stairway leads to the loggia and two other front entrances lead to the lower floor. Much attention has been given to fire protection.

Provision has been made for the future installation of a cafeteria in the gymnasium, which communicates with the adjoining kitchen. An expensive observation platform overlooks the gymnasium. Steel lockers, drinking fountains, bicycle racks, foot warmers, specially designed chalk troughs, unique windows and many other valuable features are incorporated. We surely have cause for gratulation over the prospect. With this magnificent structure and with an able faculty, who can estimate the benefit that will accrue this community

in education and moral tone, in improved methods in the home and on the farm, in quality of population attracted, in increased valuation, and in general uplift.”



1914 High School

In addition to being functional and modern in every way, the school presented a unique appearance for a school building. It had high false parapets that curved in an elegant manner. These non-reinforced decorative embellishments, as well as the building construction practices at that time were the undoing of the beautiful school. Corcoran High school trustees faced the fact that the 1914 building did not meet the provisions of the Field Act passed after the Long Beach earthquake in 1934. The trustees were far ahead of most school districts in Kings County, and called for

an inspection by the State Division of Architecture in 1937. The structural engineer informed the board that the 25-year-old building did not meet current structural requirements. The board immediately instituted measures to replace the structure. Preliminary sketches and justification documents were completed and sent to the state for approval. Work began on the new building October 14, 1938 with the anticipation that the new school would be ready for the beginning of the 1939-40 school year. Roscoe Bessey was a coach and teacher during the time of construction and stated that the new building was built around the old school, and that classes were in session at that time. The old building was demolished after the completion of the new structure.



1939 New High School