

Our Rich History

Central High History

There are probably many things in life that are considered institutions, but very few actually live up to that name. An institution is something that not only has been around for a long time but also something that has helped contribute to the advancement of the surrounding area and left a mark on the population. There can be little doubt that Central High School is considered an institution, not only in Bay City but around the state of Michigan. In the past 80 years, Central students and alumni have set a high standard in academics and athletics, community service, and advancement. Over 145,000 students have passed through the doors of Central High and more than 41,000 people have received high school diplomas from this institution. For years the only public high school in the city, Central High has become synonymous with success and achievement. It has been over three-quarters of a century since the first graduating class went through the doors, and, in that time, CHS has definitely become a pillar of the community.



As the city entered the Roaring 20's, plans were already in the works and construction began on large school buildings on both sides of the river. On March 27, 1922, Central High School opened its doors on both the east and west sides of the river. Originally constructed without a third floor, Central soon added those areas to the wings of the school in order to house the Bay City Junior College. The college operated out of Central until 1960, when it became Delta College and moved to its present location off

Mackinaw, Delta, and Hotchkiss roads. Enrollment figures in 1923 included 990 high school and 85 junior college students. A staff of 54 instructors provided lessons while four regularly employed cafeteria workers, five day and two night janitors, one engineer, and one day and one night fireman rounded out the support staff.

When Central High opened in the spring of 1922, the building may have been ready for business, but the surrounding grounds still needed additional work. Students entering school at that time recall having to walk over wooden planks to get past the mud because sidewalks were not completed. A house still occupied the center of the courtyard and had to be removed by a team of horses

before landscaping could be completed. On that late March day in 1922, the entire staff and student body began the day at Eastern High,

then walked down Madison Avenue to Columbus Avenue and continued down to the new school.



Nelda Taylor, who served at Central in the English Department for over 40 years, was a member of the Class of 1925 and recalled in a letter to former Principal Jean Fischer what the school was like in its early days.

"The sidewalks and lawns were not in place. Actually, there was a house right in the middle of the campus and no access to the front doors at all. We entered through two back doors and walked on make-shift planks over mud puddles. The backlot was not filled with students' cars. In winter, it was flooded for skating. The rest of the year it was our athletic field. Each spring, we gave a beautiful operetta, teachers participating too, and costumes were made by the Home Economics Department. It was Charles White, who originated the Band Bounce and gave the first all band concert. All this is quite remarkable when one considers no practicing was done during school time. We worked after school or early in the morning. We received two points credit for choir, but no school time was used for music."

Today, the band has its own room and uses time in and out of class to work on performances. The addition of a band room not the only change that has taken place in the structure of the building. While the major portions of the exterior of the school remained relatively unchanged in 80 years, there have been many additions and

renovations. The windows in the entire school were changed to be more energy efficient in 1973, although many purists will also claim that move took away some of the character of the



is

original building. The "new" gymnasium was constructed for the junior college in 1957, and the art and band wings were also additions to the structure.



The cafeteria or commons area was improved and enlarged in 1995 and the stadium, along with the tower, probably the focal point of the school, began undergoing the first stage of a two-year renovation just prior to the 1997 graduation ceremony. The need for the stadium, originally called Central Stadium, was underlined during a 1924 Thanksgiving Day football contest between the Wolves and Flint Central. At that time, football contests were held in what is now the back parking lot. Stands were constructed on the sidelines of the field, and crowds regularly filled the bleachers on Friday nights to watch the exploits of Garland (Chief) Nevitt's squads. The stands couldn't hold the fans that showed up that holiday to watch two undefeated teams do battle. The

bleachers held 1,500 people but 10,000 came to Central to see the visitors beat the Wolves 12-3. While the game results turned out poorly for CHS, the gate results proved to everyone that a new athletic facility was needed.

Completed in 1925, the stadium was funded by local contributions with citizens buying bricks for either one or five dollars. Second in size at the time only to stadiums at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, Central's home field is reportedly the oldest high school stadium in the state and originally seated 7,000. The Wolves played their home games at Central Stadium until September 23, 1973, when the name was changed to Engel Stadium in honor of their long-time coach. In 1950, Elmer Engel took over the reins of a team that had lost 27 consecutive games and worked them to a 3-6 record. For the next 23 years, no Central varsity football team lost more than three games all year as Engel led BCC to five Class A state football championships. Three teams went undefeated and Engel's 165-34-8 record at Central guaranteed him a spot in the Michigan Coaches Hall of Fame. While the stadium has received a needed facelift, another symbol of Central, the tower, hopes to someday do the same. At one time the tower was used as office space, a gathering location for junior college students, and an observatory. Unused in recent years because of fire safety regulations, the tower needs renovations of its own before it can be put back into service. In the 1980s a committee was formed and initial work was done to secure some



funding and cost figures, but plans for the tower at this time are again on the back burner.

When Central opened, the corner of Johnson and Columbus was the location of an orphanage. The orphanage building later housed the Bay City Public School Board of Education while an adjacent building was the location for the district and student print shop. When those services were transferred to the former Dorland School on Walnut Street, the buildings were razed and the land was turned into a parking lot for students and staff. In 1922, the only parking was angle parking in front of the school. The auditorium was added to the main building in 1924 and dedicated in 1925. At that time, there were no art or music wings, and the auditorium side facing Columbus Avenue was laden with large windows. A butcher shop was on the corner of the block and the new wings were not completed until the late 1960s and early '70s. The auditorium can house approximately 1,000 occupants and has long been used by the community for concerts and presentations. The auditorium was also the site of major renovations during concerts and presentations. The auditorium was also the site of major renovations during the 1995-96 school year when the ceiling was redone, about 20 seats were added, walls were cleaned and painted, and a new purple curtain replaced the 25-year-old gold curtain.

When the school was opened, the main doorways facing Columbus were illuminated by lights on both sides of the archways. Upon entering the doors, students were greeted by the sight of two statues, one on either side, where display cases are now located. The main office was located where it is now, and if one looks closely over the doors and to the sides, they will see a copy of a Greek frieze, a gift from the first graduating class from Central, the 1922 seniors of Eastern High School. Up front in the main office, students could find an information desk/school store counter where school supplies and college textbooks could be purchased. Proceeding west down the main hall, one would find the school library and reading room. Across from the library, in what is now the co-op office, one of the three study halls was located which could seat a combined total of 134 students. The other two study halls were located in the present-day computer lab and at the eastern end of the second-floor hall. Down the west hallway were normal classrooms including a shop room and a printing room.



While the art rooms were originally located in what is now the counseling center, the present-day Wolves Den also served in a unique function. The large room contained collapsible walls which allowed the area to be used as individual classrooms or one large meeting room. This was known as the "Little Theater" and was where the drama

productions were planned and rehearsed. The only remaining trace of the "Little Theater" is found on the side of a classroom and the front of the records office, where one must take a step

up onto the former stage to enter the room. To the right of the theater was the mechanical drawing room and further down the hall the cafeteria and kitchen. The present cafeteria and kitchen is about 75 percent larger than the original, which featured students from the cooking classes serving and assisting in the cafeteria while a young man worked the cash register at lunchtimes.

Down the eastern side hallways, there were more classrooms and the girls' locker and shower rooms. The entrance to the spectators' gallery at the swimming pool was also in this hallway. At the end of the hallway was the entrance to the gymnasium, which is now referred to as the small gym. It, like the auditorium on the other side of the courtyard, had large windows facing Columbus Avenue as well as windows on the south side. The bleachers were located in the balconies on both ends. Going through the open stairways to the second floor, students found money and typing classes, as well as a unique set-up. Along with the two study rooms and Home Economics and Commerce Departments, there were two sewing rooms, a dining area, bedroom, bath, and kitchen. Additional rooms were devoted to English, math and history. The third floor contained the chemistry and lecture room in the east hall and the physics lab and lecture room in the west. The southern rooms were the botany, zoology, and agricultural labs and lecture rooms as well as a skylighted greenhouse, which is no longer in use.



The tower originally contained two classrooms and at the top a revolving observatory dome with a six-foot telescope. The tower was closed on August 19, 1983, because of fire code restrictions. Renovations were made in April of 1987 when the brass chime rods were replaced with a taping system. The brass chime rods had not been replaced because they were no longer manufactured, and the bells had not sounded in the tower for 15 years prior to the taping system. What will the next 80 years hold for Bay City and its high school students? Nothing is certain, but, if past history holds true, Central High School will probably be here. It will likewise remain the same kind of institution dedicated to serving the same kind of people and serving the same kind of function, that of remaining a pillar of the community.