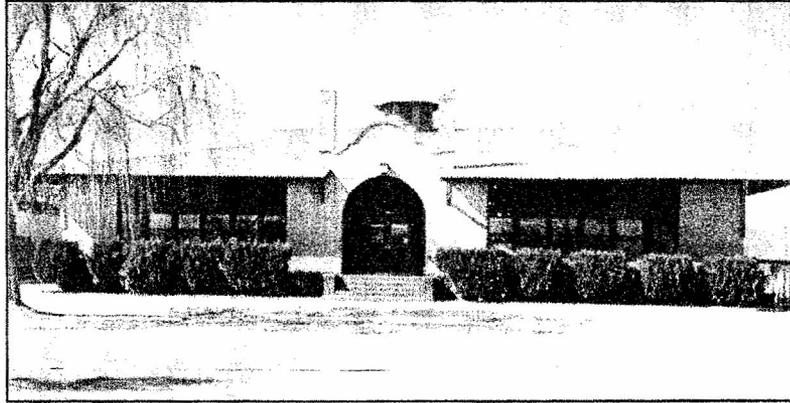


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PEARCE



The main building of Pearce School as it appears today.

A Brief History of Pearce School

by Jim Burnett

Author's Note: In the tenth year of the 20th Century, Pearce Grammar School, District 22, was 13 years old, had three teachers, roughly 150 pupils, and a budget of a few thousand dollars. The school is now 105 years old, has 125 pupils, three busses, a six building campus, eight teachers and a budget of just over \$1,000,000.

In preparing this history, I have leaned heavily on *The Cochise County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 26, #1, Spring, 1996, and on material found among "The

Monmonier Papers," in "Special Collections," at the U of A Library. Interviews with people familiar with Pearce have been helpful, as well as news items in ancient copies of "The Tombstone Prospector" and "The Sulphur Valley News." The County School superintendent's office also has some records of the early years of Pearce Schools.

Lastly, I have relied on my own memories going back to 1924 when I was enrolled in the first grade of said school, and all the years since.

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February 18, 1895, John James Pearce filed the first of many claims to soon be filed on and around the north slope of what would be called the Pearce Hill. People swarmed in and squatted on the flat ground to the north and west of the hill, and the town of Pearce was born.

In September of 1896, subscriptions were being taken to build a school and hire a teacher. Donations ran from one dollar, lots of them, to over fifty dollars by businesses. Lest we disparage these one-dollar contributions, let us remember, one dollar was a full day's wage in that distant day.

By September 1897 the building was completed, and school opened with 50 pupils and one teacher, Miss Ollie Woodward. The lady was paid \$65.00 per month.

The building was put up by Mr. John Gates and cost between four and five hundred dollars. Presumably the schoolhouse was built near the northwest corner of what today is the school ground, though I have found no mention of what it was built

of or where it was put. However, the September 21, 1897 "Tombstone Prospector" states a "crew of 12 men are sinking a shaft just back of the school house." In the first half of the 20th Century, there was a large shaft just outside of the northwest corner of the schoolyard. That shaft was long ago filled in and no trace of it remains, but it was there.

Minutes of School Board meetings in 1898 and 1899 authorized money for repairs to the roof and adobe walls of the building, and pretty well established that it was an adobe building.

However, the useful life of that first schoolhouse was short. The minutes of the August 25, 1901, meeting of the School Board records a formal thanks to the Commonwealth Milling and Mining Company for the schoolhouse they built and donated to the District. It also authorizes the order of desks for the new building. The Board also authorized the sale of the old building to B.T. Pruitt for \$150.00.

Where that new building was placed, how large it was,

or what it was made of remains a mystery, sort of. I have found no mention of that building, other than the August 15, 1901, board meeting minutes. I have concluded it must have been the large frame building, half church and half school that stood just south of the big square brick building that is the center of Pearce School today.

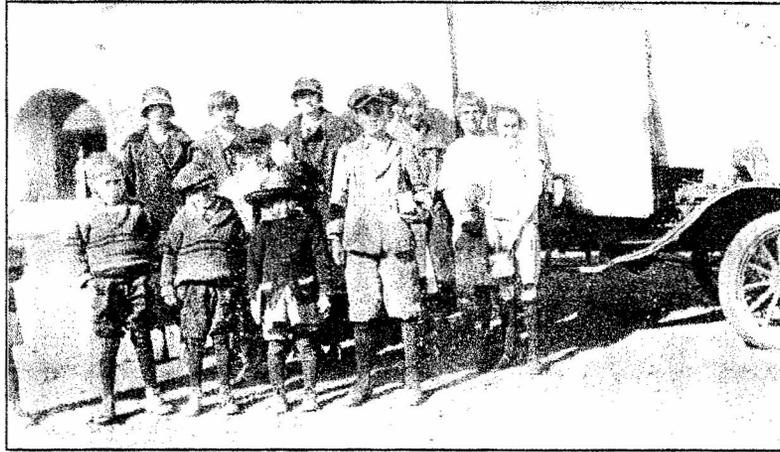
Information on Pearce School from 1900 to 1910 is sketchy, but apparently the student body grew to 145 pupils and three rooms and presumably three teachers.

Interesting item "In 1913 the name of Miss Nettie Gallagher, comely daughter of the village blacksmith appears on the roll of teachers for the first time. Miss Nettie was destined to slip in and out of the system 'til about the mid-century mark. After retiring from teaching at Pearce she went to a Mormon settlement in Mexico and continued to teach for a number of years. Nettie Gallagher Harper is honored by the Pearce School auditorium that bears her name."

The Board of Trustees of the Pearce School District #22 purchased from the town site of Pearce lots 1-12 and 31-42 of block 17 on January 8, 1912. The price was \$70.00. This was presumably to provide additional room for the contemplated new school building.

An election was held November 22, 1913, to bond the district for \$10,000.00 to build a four-room schoolhouse. The measure carried by a vote of 13 for and none against. The small vote is surprising.

May 30, 1914, a contract was let to J.M. Sparks to build a four-room high school to be completed in three months. The price for cream-pressed brick construction was \$8,499.00. The resultant building was nearly square with 80 feet north to south and 62 feet east to west. A central hall ran through the building east to west with two rooms to the north and two to the south. Each room had a cloak closet and a big coal-burning stove in one corner, and a small office between the two rooms. Two brick outhouses to the



First Pearce School bus.

west of the building and a frame coal shed between, completed the project.

On February 19, 1915, an election was called to decide if the school should sell lots 1-12 and 31-42, block 17, to the Commonwealth Mining Company. The consideration was a 99-year lease on the ground now occupied by the school buildings. The measure carried five votes for and none against, again a small turn out.

Somehow, someone built the school on land not owned by the district and the school to this day is on leased land. The lease runs out at the end of 2013, which isn't very far away.

Through the years from

1910 to 1920, the enrollment held fairly steady, for while the mining continued to decline and the population of the town continued to dwindle, more people settled in the surrounding area and their children attended the school in Pearce.

During 1920 a Union High School District consisting of Pearce, Ash Creek, and Whitewater, Webb and Texas (the Elfrida area) was formed. In September 1920 the Pearce Union High School with 50 pupils and three teachers opened for business. The high school occupied the north half (two rooms and an office) of the main building. They also used a little adobe building a

couple of hundred yards to the north of the school as the girls' shower and commercial studies room. A small frame house on the southeast corner of the school grounds became a chemistry lab and boys' shower. The grammar school occupied the south half of the main building and the school half of the previously mentioned building donated by the Commonwealth Mining Company.

The two schools retained their separate identities, each having its own board of trustees and staff, but transportation was shared. Transportation was a big item as Pearce Union High School District was a far-flung, sparsely populated, poverty-stricken district. During the '30s and '40s the district did not have an operating mine, a foot of railroad, a gas line, or a going business that could be taxed, only little farms and ranch land. Students were gathered up from the Stronghold on the west, to lower Turkey Creek on the east, Servoss on the north to Courtland and Kelton, to Webb and Elfrida on the

south.

Early day busses were mostly family cars: Dodge and Buick, Ford and Chevrolet, usually driven by the oldest pupil in the family. In the 1930s, the most prestigious of them was a Pearce Arrow, owned by John Gradall of the Kansas Settlement. In the late '20s, Mrs. Martin Williams hauled Elfrida area pupils in a sort of express wagon, one with a solid roof and sides of heavy metal mesh. About 1930 the district purchased a real yellow school bus and hired Dick Olson to drive it. Mr. Olson was a strict disciplinarian, always safe, and was always on time. Slightly feared and highly respected by parents and pupils alike, Dick Olson became a living legend. I believe he continued to drive the Elfrida bus until the high school moved south.

The basic structure of a teaching principal and two teachers for the grade school and a teaching principal and two teachers for the high school continued from 1920 to the early 1940s when the high school was moved to the

Elfrida area, because that is where most of the high school pupils were.

The schoolyard was fenced in 1927 or maybe 1928 and the town donkeys no longer loitered on the school grounds.

In 1932 the Southern Pacific took up their track from Cochise to Pearce and the pumping station and also the school at Servoss was abandoned. The school building was hauled to Pearce and placed just west of the half-school, half-church building, which was just south of the main building. It became the commercial building for the high school.

Pearce had been so depressed for so long the great depression didn't make much difference, except for one thing. Cochise County residents couldn't pay their taxes so the county couldn't pay the teachers. The county issued warrants to be paid if the county ever got any money. Some banks and some individuals cashed them, but at a discount. This worked a hardship on the school staff and by extension, the whole community.

On the positive side, in 1933, shortly after Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated, the W.P.A. came to town and with it came a little money, which spread around quickly. The big project for Pearce was to be a gymnasium for the school. One crew began hauling wagon loads of adobe bricks salvaged from old abandoned walls downtown, to the construction site at the southwest corner of the schoolyard. Another crew poured a concrete slab, which was to be the floor of the gymnasium, but somehow the project became bogged down. Through the years, the piles of adobe bricks slowly melted down, but the slab became a combination basketball court, tennis court and skating rink, which were enjoyed by many kids for many years.

As previously noted, the high school was moved south in the early '40s and the student body of the grade school continued to shrink, first to two teachers, then to one. Through the '50s it struggled along as a one-teacher school, but in 1959, there were only five pupils left

and the county school superintendent was ready to close Pearce Grammar School. John and Mary Magoffin, who lived between Cochise Stronghold and Dragoon, had two children who had been attending school at Cochise. They transferred to Pearce and the school was saved for another year.

Sunsites and adjacent areas were beginning to roll, and the next year 1960, the school had 41 pupils and two teachers. Pearce School had narrowly escaped the long slow slide into oblivion. In 1965 there were 77 pupils, and by 1966, four teachers taught 82 students. By 1975 there were five teachers and 154 students. Pearce was really on a roll.

When the high school left, the grade school suddenly had access to extra classrooms. The shrinking student body and shrinking budget excluded any improvements other than basic maintenance, but there was one exception. About 1960, the plumbing in the old schoolhouse was upgraded and the old brick privies that had served unnumbered students for half a century

disappeared forever.

The year 1975 ushered in a decade of building to meet the needs of the expanding student body and to meet the requirement of modernizing education. The Nettie Harper auditorium went up, followed by the Jack Giles gymnasium in 1978. Additional classrooms, a teacher's lounge and a band room were added. In 1987, the administration building went up just east of the gymnasium.

This completed the school as it is today, which seems to be adequate for the current student body, K through 8, as the professionals say.

Today (2003), 125 pupils ride to Pearce Grammar School in three big yellow busses where eight teachers, helped by four teachers' aides teach them. This year's budget is just a tad over one million dollars – quite a jump from the little school of a century ago.

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