

The Gem High School

By Jerry Knudson

Anyone driving west on the county road beyond what used to be Foster Farms and approaches the town of Gem, Kansas today will see a three-story brick building which once housed the school system, with windows shattered and the premises overgrown with weeds. Vandals have taken their toll since the school was closed (consolidated) in 1966. The high school was on the top floor, with the elementary grades, gymnasium--with balconies and a stage on one side--and lunchroom below.

It always amused my classes at Temple University, based in Philadelphia but also with students, that there were only six members in our graduating class at the Gem High School in 1950. But what really grabbed my Temple students was stories of the Midwestern custom of the senior "sneak," which in our case meant all six of us crammed into one car, along with our coach and sponsor Robert Beery, as we wreaked mild havoc from Topeka to Kansas City to St. Louis to Memphis. The experience of the Gem school and all those who dwell in memory therein was by no means unique to us. What follows is intended simply as representative of hundreds of small high schools in western Kansas and elsewhere who in days gone by served their communities well.

The abandoned Gem school building is a lonely sentinel on the short-grass plains of Kansas, with little left of a once thriving neighborhood. Today, there are only the grain elevators, Post Office and the former Baptist church, built partly with the willing hands of the men of the community, which now serves as a community center.

But anyone who thinks that Gem is a ghost town, the remnants of a lost culture, has never attended one of the Gem school reunions, as I did several years ago, in the community building of Colby Community College. It was a joyous occasion with perhaps 150 to 200 alumni there, swapping stories, joking and laughing, and wondering who that was at the far table. The school and community spirit of Gem are still there.

We all have our favorite teachers, but I want to mention three to whom generations of Gem students would also pay tribute. First and foremost was Breta Treat (on the first day of class, she said, "Please call me Breta if that is more comfortable with you.") She earned

the respect of her students by listening to them and meeting them at whatever stage of life they found themselves. (One former student, on good authority, said, "if it hadn't been for Breta, I would have ended up in the state penitentiary.")

Secondly, there was Bill MacArthur, who served as superintendent at Gem for several years before going on to become head of the school system at Manhattan, Kansas for many years. Nothing was too small for his attention. When we entered a one-act play, "The White Lawn," in a drama contest

at what was then Ft. Hays State Teachers College, Bill MacArthur devised a homemade rheostat for lighting effects. We won second place. When Breta and her husband Clyde invited the MacArthurs, Bill and Ethel, over for dinner once, she showed me her invitation, which read, "We will have a feast of reason and a flow of souls."

Finally, there was Ida Saddler (mother of my classmate Duane who married Peggy Lanning). Duane and I were the only two boys in a class with four girls. (We figured it out that we had two girls for each one of us). Duane was the sports star of our class, yet yielded to me when it came time to pick an editor to revive the defunct Gem Tiger, a little

mimeographed paper mailed out to school patrons. We even published a special edition listing all Gem alumni up to that time, knocking on doors in Colby to track down strays. And we took our high school journalism seriously. When I was laid

up with the chicken pox, Estelle Treat (who later married D.J. Bugbee) drove out to our farm to pick up my latest "It editorial" hot off my sickbed so we wouldn't miss an issue.

But back to Ila Saddler, who taught seventh and eighth grades briefly. (Twila Saddler also taught at Gem.) It is strange how fleeting moments somehow stick in our memory. I remember Ida at a volleyball tournament at Page City, refereeing the net from her perch in the balcony. When a Page City official on the opposite side disputed one of her calls. But when Ila stuck by her guns, the official stalked out in rage. We were embarrassed and confused until Ila's clear and authoritative voice rang out, "Play ball!"

Gem was one of the few towns in Kansas that aroused such loyalty that it produced its own History -- by Bill James, founder of the Colby newspaper Prairie Drummer, and Marge Brown, resident of Colby. I have relied on their work partly to present this capsule history of the Gem High School and community.

The Gem school earned a reputation that attracted such

Commencement speakers as Burton W. Marvin, dean of the William Allen White School of Journalism at KU, and Jerry Appee, who used to read poetry on KXXX, the first radio station in Colby, and broadcast live basketball tournaments at Rexford and elsewhere.

We never had enough guys to play football, so in the fall it was volleyball and in the spring, baseball or track. In basketball, I think we won one game out of two seasons, and we finished one game with only three players when our reserves had all fouled out. But no matter, the day after a game, men would gather at the tire and body shop to talk with animation about what went wrong the night before.

There was one bone of contention, however, about whether or not dancing should be allowed in the Gem school. (Remember this was the late 1940s, light years away from the social mores of today.) Leading the opposition was the Rev. Irwin Bradshaw, a good and decent man who used to hand out Hershey bars to all kids how could produce A's their report cards as they boarded the school bus he drove to help make a living. But he had a thing against dancing.

I was the student representative at the School Board meeting at which the issue came to a head. Ernie Ziegelmeier, who wisely skirted the issue of separation of church and state, focused on the social merits of dancing for young people. "Where did you meet your wife?" Ernie asked. There was no answer, and some of us lived to perform an exhibition of square dancing on the Gem High School stage later on.

There had been other outlets, of course. I remember whirling around with gusto with a Polka partner at the old Opera House in Colby. And before that, "bootleg" dances were held in the backroom of the grocery store run by Wanda and "Hickie" Hickman, with sawdust on the floor. It was all good, clean fun with Russ and Lanning our chaperons. Other members of our 1950 graduating class were Jean Woerpel, Beverly Mentlick and Joyce Lauritsen.

So there you have it. Looking back on those years, I feel the greatest benefit of the Gem High School, and myriad of others like it, was that we got to know one another. And, knowing each other enabled us to know others in the wider world we were about to enter.