

FIELD OF DREAMS

Dennen Field

Editor's Note: The bulk of the research for this story was completed by Keela Case. Kudos to Keela!

According to WG Warner, in his book *Colby High School Football, 1902-1965*, scheduled football games were played for the first time in 1900. That is, the team practiced together and played one intersquad game. Games and practices were played on the area south of the school (where the primary grade school building stands today).

When the 'new' high school building was built in 1904 on South Range, games and practices continued at the North Grant location until 1921 when games were then played south of the high school. That field ran north and south and had fair grass. This was also the first year that a game was scheduled with each opponent. And then, with the completion of the Consolidated School Building on North Grant, the football team had access to good showering facilities for the first time in 1924. In 1928, when the grandstand was built at the fairgrounds, the playing field was moved there. This field ran east and west and had little grass.

Warner applauded RL Dennen, who became Superintendent of Colby Schools in 1933, for seeing that "equipment has been adequate, and plenty of footballs available, with fine improvements being made regularly."

A significant improvement was made the very next year when lights were added to the field at the fairgrounds. "The yen of this community for night football and other types of night athletics blossomed in full vigor last week following the creation of a small fund to start the ball rolling. This fund was realized from the big Lions Rotary softball game last Friday evening, which amounted to nearly \$75" (CFPT 8/22/1934).

The community supported a plan the a loan be amde to the school athletic association and guaranted by a number of men around town. The association hoped to repay the loan from the larger anticipated receipts that evening games would garner. Warner stated that they cost \$1,600.

"The game, the first football attraction ever played under lights here drew a huge crowd of interested spectators and the high school treasury was enriched to the tune of nearly \$250 which will make a nice payment upon the cost of the lights. The huge batteries of 1500-watt lamps lighted the field completely and the spectators could see every play on the field as clearly as on the brightest day. It was more satisfactory, too, for the big grandstand permitted everyone to have a clear view of the field and kept them from climbing upon each other's shoulders to have a look at the game" (CFPT 10/03/1934).

Following WWII, the school district began looking at an athletic field. The district acquired a number of lots in the Copeland & Van Patton Addition in 1948. In early 1950, the district announced their plans. "[A]rrangements were made for the Watson-Coffey contractors, who have the grading contract for the highway 24 west of Colby, to level the ground for the Stadium grounds in west Colby" (CFPT 1/12/1950).

A proposed layout for the athletic field wasn't presented to the board until January 1954 but no costs were available. In March, the school board voted to install the sprinkler system at the field. The Board then discussed the proposition of moving the football field to the new athletic field in October. And in December, the board voted to plant the athletic field and that a layout for lighting be secured from GE with poles purchased from the local REA.

In early 1955, the superintendent secured specifications for curbing a track and got estimates for lights for the athletic field. In March, with discussion focusing on the lighting plans, it seemed the consensus of opinion that the concrete curbing be delayed until the costs of the lights were determined. By the end of June, the lighting needs had been addressed.

Then in the August 4, 1955 issue of the *Colby Free Press-Tribune* it was announced, "The growing season has been so good and the grass has grown and sodded so well that the field is ready one full year earlier than had been anticipated.

"It is planned to build a wood-steel stadium, capable of caring for 2,500 spectators, but football fans will probably have to wait until 1956 to see it. An attempt is being made to provide

seating for the coming season and temporary rest rooms and changing rooms for the players will be available. If the grass had served notice of just what it was going to do there would have been time to make other preparations, but growing grass just doesn't go around talking about itself, and there you are."

The first game on the new field was played on September 23, 1955 against Almena. Some seating was provided by bringing the bleachers from the fairgrounds baseball diamond to the new athletic field which provided about 600 seats.

But a new stadium did not materialize the following year. There was discussion in August 1956 and the school board requested that estimates be secured for the completion of the athletic field so that a definite plan of construction and development could be mapped. Mr. Mann, architect from Hutchinson, was to present a plan for bleachers. At the next meeting, it was determined that plans regarding the football field be tabled. It was the board's opinion that it would be well to move slowly on the project.

A fence was erected around the field in 1957 by Jaspersen and Fryback. And in November of that year, the school board discussed the further development of the athletic field which would include dressing rooms and bleacher seating but no definite action was taken.

In recognition of RL Dennen's 25th year as superintendent of Colby Schools, the Senior Class of 1958 requested that the athletic field be named for him especially since he was responsible for the project. Later that year Dennen spoke to the Chamber of Commerce about the football stadium and pointed out, "that the fair grounds provided a good place to watch games from, but was not a very good place to play football because of the broken glass, pop bottle lids, and sand burrs. The new field has good grass, good lights, and is an all-around good place to play football, but it is not a good place to watch football unless you like to stand. 'However,' Dennen said, 'there's nothing wrong with our field that a lot of money wouldn't fix'" (CFPT 11/03/1958).

Again, the newly named Dennen Field languished. In fact the sign, designed by Mann and Co. of Hutchinson, that stands in the northwest corner of the field was not installed until September 1965.

"The situation in Colby is particularly bad, as development of track and stadium facilities has been held back by more urgent need of additional classrooms. No track meets have been held in Colby for several years and until improvement is made in the track layout, the dearth of meets here will probably continue" (CFPT 4/11/1960).

Then that summer it was announced that a committee had met for the purpose of securing bleachers for Dennen field which would be located along the north side of the field and that "the Colby players will also move their bench over to the north side as will the band and cheerleaders. A proposed platform for the high school band in front of these bleachers is under consideration also. One thing that was emphasized at this meeting yesterday was the need to get going with the idea and not to 'let it drag.' This proposal for bleachers was brought up at a school board meeting over five years ago but something else always came along to interfere" (CFPT 8/18/1960). This time . . . it did not drag.

It was soon determined that, "The new bleachers will consist of two 78 foot sections, that will together seat 1,080 spectators with the total cost of this project set at \$9,800, which will also include a man to supervise the construction of these bleachers. The Colby National Guard will provide the manpower and tools to erect these temporary-type bleachers that will set on a concrete footing" (CFPT 8/22/1960).

"The reserve seat tickets to finance these new bleachers went into circulation Tuesday morning after a kick-off breakfast at 7:00. (The tickets were being sold for \$10 and did not include admission.) School superintendent RL Dennen was the first to purchase two of these reserve seat tickets and Dale Hawk Jr. who made a delivery at the Pyramid restaurant while the kick-off breakfast was in session was next. He bought four" (CFPT 8/25/1960).

The Chamber of Commerce committee met with the school board in September regarding the bleachers. The board approved the purchases of the remaining "unsold" bleachers for use by the students with the maximum cost to be not more than \$3500.

"Going at it like well-trained bees the National Guard used their drill night to put up the new bleachers. And by 11:30 they had the job done-all 1,000 of them-complete with angle iron braces,

flat metal cross braces, green seats, foot boards and bolts" (CFPT 9/15/1960).

In 1954, new stadium seats were purchased for the south side of the field by the Chamber of Commerce to replace the bleachers that had collapsed at during the Colby-Norton football game the previous year. It provided seating for 500 fans. While constructing the stands, new aluminum siding was applied to the backs of the north stadium to block the cold north wind.

With the stadium work complete, the *Prairie Drummer* again raised the question as to why Colby still has no track (4/17/1965). So with some more pushing and prodding for another year, the board of education voted to start construction on an all weather track. Bids were opened on October 3, 1966 with the low bid of \$21,376.85 from Tarbet Construction Co. of Ulysses. George M. McKee, Jr., Construction Engineers from Colby, drew up the plans for the track and supervised the project. The quarter mile track was to be paved with a pale red volcanic ash material and would have eight lanes incorporating a 220-yard straightway. The runways for broad jump, pole vault and high jump were also slated to be paved.

In June 1990, after 25 years with the volcanic ash track, the school board determined that they were willing to look at information for urethane or rubberized asphalt surfaces. CHS track coaches, Gordon Rasmussen and Dee Hovda made a presentation regarding lost practice days due to the poor track condition after rain; that quality teams would not run on the track due to the concern for injuries and that times were better on synthetic surfaces.

On October 1st, the USD #315 school board approved a bid for \$167,854 for a new track surface from Athco of Lenexa, KS. The bid was the lowest of several options from two bidders. An estimate was that the surface would last up to eight years and a new coat of surfacing would cost about \$15,000. The rubberized track installation was completed by the spring and the expense was borne by the school district, the college and the community.

Throughout Colby high school football's and track's history, the community has come through in helping the school make playing fields, seating, lights, etc. possible. Presently, the CHS All Sports Booster Club is working on raising funds for the Dennen Field project which will address resurfacing the track and building a new metal stadium. Though it always seems to take time, our history shows that diligence has eventually paid off.