

## NILES

The Alpha Omega Chapter, Alpha Delta State, of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, an honorary women educators' group, in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, presents a brief history of Niles and its schools.

The history of Niles began with the first white people who traveled to this vicinity on the only road in Trumbull County, which reached from Pittsburgh to the tract of land known as Salt Springs. This two or three acre site, located south of the Mahoning River and about one mile west of the present city of Niles on Salt Springs Road, had provided salt for the abundance of forest animals since time immemorial. The Indians found this area to be equally valuable and reluctantly left only when the white settlers became too numerous.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, salt to the pioneers was an important necessity for the preservation and preparation of food. It was scarce and extremely expensive. The seaboard colonies imported it while the westward moving pioneers were forced to seek their own. A discovery of salt licks or springs was certain to draw settlers to an area.

The existence of the spring was first recorded when in 1755 Lewis Evans first marked his map showing the existence of the spring. During the years that followed, settlers from Pennsylvania traveled the Mahoning River in their canoes to boil water for salt and returned home to retail their harvest as a profit.

The state of Connecticut did not cede her land during the Revolutionary War when other seaboard states were induced to surrender theirs. Connecticut reserved for herself a large block of the 41<sup>st</sup> parallel that became known as the Connecticut Western Reserve. In 1797, General Arthur St. Clair was named governor; and on July 10, 1800, he created a new political sub-division known as Trumbull County. Officials were appointed, and the country proceeded with its business of selling property. Records show that in 1801 Reuben Harmon purchased the first tract of land listed on the surveyor's map as Weathersfield Township 3, Range 3, which included part of the Salt Springs. In the years that followed, the Springs declined in importance, and pioneers were drawn to the area because of its varied industrial possibilities. One of the first hardy industrialists to arrive from Virginia was James Heaton who, along with his brother Daniel, built the first iron furnace on Yellow Creek in Poland Township in 1802. Four years later James established his own settlement on the Mosquito Creek where he built a gristmill. He later added a sawmill, a forge, and finally, in 1812, a blast furnace which he named after his daughter, Maria. The small settlement soon became known as Heaton's Furnace. The town later was renamed Niles after Hezekiah Niles, a man whom James Heaton had much admired.

When Heaton retired in 1830 and later died in 1836, his son Warren managed the business until his death in 1842. Niles was the threshold of industrial growth, and by 1856 had 1,000 inhabitants registered in the community. By 1873 Niles had the

following industries: two blast furnaces, four rolling mills, a nail works, foundry, boiler works, and a brick yard.

This rapid industrial growth brought settlers to the area who, in accordance with the American dream, felt the need for education and provided schools for their children. Prior to 1834 a small log cabin with greased paper windows was located on South Main Street. Another school, whose teacher was Herman Harmon, a descendant of the saltmaker, Reuben Harmon, was located on high ground above the Heaton Gristmill. In 1834 when James and Warren Heaton plotted the community, they provided land for the first public school, a little white frame building erected on North Main Street which is now the building site of the McKinley Memorial. In that school which he attended until age nine, William McKinley received his first formal instruction, on the very site of the memorial later to commemorate his martyrdom. Several private schools were also in operation by 1850, one founded by Dr. and Mrs. Backley for non-residents, and a select school taught by Amy Eaton for the preparation of men who wished to enter Allegheny College.

In those days, school was not compulsory; and the boys and girls were required by custom to sit on opposite sides of the classroom. Long wooden benches provided seats and sloping boards formed the desks. The teacher's desk was situated on a platform opposite the door. Behind the desk was a blackboard on which a rod was prominently displayed. Students who misbehaved were punished by having to stand and face the class or by having the rod applied in its proper place.

The teachers had to pass an examination given by the county and were hired from two to five months. Salaries ranged from \$10 per month, plus 100 pounds of iron for men, to \$6 per month for women. Parents had to pay the teachers in proportion to the number of children they had attending school.

In 1846, the school year began November 3 and ended April 17. The enrollment was 112; 56 males and 56 females. The average daily attendance was 59. Subjects taught were writing, geography, arithmetic, philosophy, grammar and algebra.

Teachers boarded at the homes of the students. Parents were always within reaching distance should the teacher find the need to discuss their student's progress. Books were scarce, well taken care of, and highly prized since all children in a family used them. Daily lessons were written on small slates, since writing paper was too expensive. After each lesson, the slates were cleaned with a cloth until sponges came into use. When required to use paper, children used quills and fine sand was used to dry the ink. Blotters were a luxury. Teachers, however, used steel pens.

The growing population made it necessary to construct another schoolhouse in 1842 on the corner of Leslie and Linden Avenues. District 8 Weathersfield Township, which included the vicinity of Niles, organized a school board consisting of three members: William McKinley, Sr., the President's father, Jacob Robinson, and Dr. Miller Blackly. The district was later called Niles City School District. As the district grew,

additional staff was added. The board increased to six members in 1869 and consisted of Josiah Robbins, T. Calvin Stewart, William Campbell, S.D. Young, William Davis, and William C. Mann.

The Central School, now located in Central Park, was started in 1870, completed in 1871, and opened in May 1871, with six teachers, including the principal. The building was constructed of brick, had three stories and a basement and cost \$39,980 to build.

In 1875 L. L. Campbell was appointed the first superintendent of the district; and Frank Robbins, the only member of the senior class, was the first Niles High School graduate. By the late 1800's teachers' salaries had increased to \$45, and this included the superintendent's. Formerly, teachers were given part of their salary in bar iron, which the area furnaces produced in abundance. Records showed Miss Harriet Hyde as the exception. She was reappointed to her position, given a 50 cent raise, and exempted from having to take part of her pay in iron.

The school enrollment had increased to 1,370 students by 1900, and there were nine school buildings housed on eight sites. The district employed 31 teachers and principals and a superintendent. Tuition was charged from the many non-resident students from Bristolville, Weathersfield, Vienna, Mineral Ridge, and elsewhere. The fees were 80 cents for primary grades, \$1.20 for grammar school and \$1.80 for high school.

The board set the course of study to be 12 years. Subjects for the ordinary four year high school curriculum in 1900 included algebra, business arithmetic, bookkeeping, botany, English, geography, government, history, Latin, literature, rhetoric, physics, plane and solid geometry, and physiology. In 1901, the board added German, drawing, writing, and music.

Records of class standing were distributed every 12 weeks. Students were allowed to work at their own speed and were either promoted or demoted when it was determined what was best for the child.

During the 20 years before the turn of the century, public schools were encouraged by local literary societies to sponsor debates, public recitations, and essay-writing contests for students. These were thought to be good practice as each graduating student was required to prepare and present a commencement address. The audience was spared these lengthy presentations because very few students actually graduated.

In addition to the verbal exchanges, the Niles Schools were also expected to reflect the moral standards prevailing at the time. In 1886, every member of the student body wrote a pledge to abstain from the use of liquor and tobacco and to dedicate himself to "clean and pure living."

In 1900, the district had four of the seven elementary schools in use as one-room schools. Two schools had two rooms; and old Central High, the best three-story structure in the county, was in good condition. By 1910 it was not large enough and had fallen behind for high school standards. The McKinley High School, now Edison Junior High, was completed in 1914. All the one-room and wooden schools were gone by 1934, the Niles Centennial Year. There were seven brick schools, McKinley High and Edison Junior High --- with an enrollment of 3,006 pupils and 114 teachers.

At the present time the Niles School District has eight elementary schools, two junior highs, and a new high school --- housing approximately 4,300 pupils and a staff of some 200 teachers and administrators.

The Catholic church schools, both Mt. Carmel and St. Stephens, have made a significant contribution to education in Niles, Ohio. St. Stephen's parish in 1893 transformed its old church, a small frame structure built in 1864, into a two-room school. The building was utilized until 1900 when the parish erected a new school at the rear of the church. The school consists of grades one through eight. The building has since been replaced with another on the corner of Arlington and State Streets. St. Stephen's also sponsored a music academy in 1898 in which piano and violin lessons were given. Both schools were staffed by the Sisters of Holy Humility of Mary, also known as "Blue Nuns."

In 1949 Mt. Carmel opened its school doors on Robbins Avenue and in 1958 dedicated its present school, pre-kindergarten, and grades one through eight on Rhodes Avenue. The school is staffed by Sister Adores of the Most Precious Blood.

Today, education in the Niles City School is most certainly worth its salt.

*This script by Susan Berndt, narration by Gene Roberts. These programs were prepared by the Delta Kappa Gamma Society, in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, to promote a better understanding of the history of the townships of Trumbull County with a focus on early education and the role of the woman educator.*