

Rider Finding Coal Croppings Triggered Dog Holes' That Became Town of Savanna

Editor's Note—The history of Savanna schools is contained in a full research of Pittsburg county schools as compiled by the Pittsburg County Retired Teachers Association for entry in the 75th anniversary of Oklahoma's statehood competition, for which it won a blue ribbon. The two writers acknowledge - with appreciation the assistance of Mrs. Grace Manos, Mr. and Mrs. Champ Hodgens, Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Haswell, Joe Brown, Raphael Jones, Mrs. Lucille Oliver, and old letters furnished by Marcella Wilkins.

By Agnes Carter, assisted by Pearl Dunn

Savanna is a small town located nine miles west of McAlester in Pittsburg county, Oklahoma. Savanna had its beginning years ago when a rider passing through came upon a coal cropping. After the word was spread, people began to sink "dog holes". They were worked with a whim and mules walking in circles. The supply seemed to be inexhaustible, and a mining company soon sank two large shafts that became known as No. 1 and No. 2.

The mining company built rows of houses for miners' families who came in from the east. These houses were two and three room structures, and they rented for \$2.00 per room per month. Workers began to come in from all over the Territory. A company store was built along with other business buildings. The people soon built a Catholic church and a Methodist church. With this influx of families the need for a school was soon a reality. The mines were beginning to produce and the miners were making money. The M. K. and T. railroad and the Frisco lines ran a race to see which would get a right-of-way through this part of Indian Territory. The M.K. and T. won. In 1888 there was an explosion in the No. 2 mine which closed down the mines, and the people who remained in the area began to farm and raise cattle.

Savanna was incorporated as a city in 1950. The first city council members were Champ Hodgens, Hubert Forbis, and Harold Lindley. They promoted the installment of the first water system.

The first post office in Savanna was located in the Knox store, which was later purchased and operated as the Caffaro store for many years. The postoffice was moved and operated by Anna Knox on the corner of Main and Choctaw avenue until a few years ago, when it was moved to its present location.

The postoffice has been operated by Anna Knox, Charles Wilson, Anna Lee Stanridge, Bessie Gossett, Billie Jo Phifer, Flora Bernard, and the present postmaster, Harry Joe Frasco.

The first school in Savanna about which records can be located was established in 1897-98 and was constructed of rough lumber. This building caught fire at one time, but Professor Aston and the boys of the school were able to put out the fire. In those days schools were few and far between and were maintained by popular subscription with the pupils usually paying a fee of one dollar a month.

There were no qualifications other than knowing how to read and write, required of the teachers. In 1898-99 Miss Fleming took the school, and the length of her tenure is unknown. From letters written by Beulah Mackey Jones to her brother when he was away attending an Indian boarding school, we find factual information that she taught in the Methodist church during the years of 1905-1907.

By an act of congress on May 29, 1908, Savanna school district acquired a tract of 1.30 acres for \$25 on which a white two-story concrete block building was constructed, and this was the first permanent school. This building was

used for grades one through eight and served the community until 1916. At that time a three-story red building of brick was constructed and a high school was begun. The old white building was still used for grades one through six, with grades seven through twelve moving into the new

building. The first graduating class was in 1922 and members were Thelma Savage, Helen Pfeiffer, and Eva Frasco. During the next 15 years the school continued to progress with an increase in enrollment and more pupils graduating from high school.

In 1936 the old red brick building and the white block building were condemned as unsafe for the children, and in 1937 a new building was constructed and equipped to house elementary and high school students at an estimated cost of \$100,000. In 1938 a small red brick gymnasium was constructed at an estimated cost of \$35,000; however,

the rock gymnasium was constructed in 1940 at an estimated cost of \$50,000 which also served as an auditorium, being equipped with stage and dressing rooms.

Many changes came in the Savanna school district with the construction of the U.S. Naval Ammunition depot in the 1940s. The school grew from a 12-teacher school with an enrollment of 346 to a 23-teacher school. During the years of World War II the enrollment jumped to 1,125, with only 23 teachers because that was all who could be employed. It was a tremendous job to operate a school with a daily average attendance of 53 pupils per room for grades 1 through 12. Students were crowded into every available space. The old brick gymnasium was made into a multiple classroom with different subjects being taught in four different sections.

Since that time a number of buildings have been constructed including the school lunchroom and an industrial arts shop. A modern teacherage was constructed in 1941 at an approximate cost of \$5,000. In the 1942 the home economics cottage was equipped with three complete units of electric refrigerators, stoves, sewing machines, and other furnishings, all at a cost of some \$10,000. A new

stadium was constructed in 1950 at an approximate cost of \$20,000, and included flood lights, public address system, concession stand and fencing.

Then, in 1953, a new high school of ultra-modern architecture style was constructed at an approximate cost of \$69,000, and it was equipped and furnished in modern furnishings. It is estimated that the total cost of the new school building construction in the Savanna district during the past 20 years has been \$290,000.

The remodeling, redecorating, and maintenance work which has been done each vacation period.

Since the Savanna schools are in the vicinity of the U.S. Naval Ammunition depot (now known as the Army Ammunition Plant) they have benefitted greatly from federal funding. This aid is known as impact aid from public laws 874 for maintenance and operation aid and 815 for school building aid. Some of the funding for the buildings listed above has come from this Federal impact aid.

The old traditional wooden desks, some double and some single, were used in Savanna schools until 1940. These were fastened to the floor. Then with the building of new buildings, new moveable furniture was purchased. The high school was equipped with the new moveable desk and

chair type. The first and second grades new furniture was tables and chairs which could be arranged in many functional arrangements. Each teacher was furnished with new modern teachers' desks and chairs and filing cabinets. Each teacher also was furnished with maps, globes, book shelving suitable for each grade level, and reference books. The high school library was brought to-date with new furniture, adequate book collections, and media equipment and materials.

The early schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling and grammar. On Friday afternoons the pupils were allowed to have a period of drawing and music. Later, history and science were added to the upper grades. There has been a great change in the curriculum of the high school over the years. Savanna has offered all the required subjects and many electives to give the students a choice in acquiring their units which are required for graduation. Over the years special emphasis has been placed on vocational education with outstanding results in vocational agriculture, industrial arts, home economics and the commercial departments. Remedial reading, physical education, driver education, band, and vocal music have been added. The vocational subjects have helped the graduates to earn a living when it was not possible for them to go to college. Savanna is a member of the North Central Association of Secondary schools, which sets high accrediting standards for the high school.

Savanna schools have had a good balance of activities for the students. Each year an all-school carnival has been held with many students participating in the elementary grades and the high school. The highlight of the carnival has been the crowning of the queen and king, with each school class sponsoring candidates and working hard to raise money and become the winner. Operettas were held for both elementary and high school students, with the Candlelight Christmas program becoming an annual event.

During World War II patriotic programs were presented to promote the sale of war bonds and stamps. Everyone always looked forward to the Senior class three-act play, which created a lot of interest among pupils, teachers, and parents. Today, the Savanna schools participate in the county, district, and state tournaments in music, speech, 4-H clubs, FHA, and FFA, as well as in athletics.

For the most part, athletics have been limited to football, basketball, and track. In the early years, basketball was played outdoors and in the daytime. In 1936 softball teams for both boys and girls were organized. With building of a gymnasium in 1938, basketball games could be played at night. To help promote interest, loyalty, and pep for athletics, the pep clubs were organized to perform at all basketball and football games. The teams were called "Bulldogs" and the school colors chosen were royal blue and old gold.

Buses were first used to transport pupils to Savanna schools in 1929, coming from the surrounding areas of Wise, Brewer, C-Tree, and Peaceable. The first buses were made up in a shop. The tops looked more like a large box, and benches were constructed along the sides for children to sit on. These were placed on a flat-top truck. They were usually owned by the persons serving as drivers. By 1930 the school-owned buses replaced the privately owned buses. By 1939, good Ford, Chevrolet, buses were purchased which had seating for 35 to 50 students, and they were heated. Today, thanks to the State Transportation division of the State Department of Education, the buses are very modern, with up-to-date equipment.

We have listed some of the accomplishments of Mrs. Pearl Dunn on previous pages of this information. Some of the accomplishments of her successor, James Anderson, were the construction of the garage building for buses and the adding of the instrumental music program or band, with Edwin Ashmore being

the first band director. Under the superintendency of Mr. Douglas Hamilton a new gymnasium was constructed in 1966 with a seating capacity of 1200, which was named for Mr. Hamilton, and a new industrial arts building in 1969. Mr. Hamilton served the district for 10 years.

We have recorded that Mrs. Pearl Dunn served the school district as a history teacher from 1935 to 1942, and then as the superintendent of schools for 15 years from 1942 to 1957.

Mr. Glenn Haswell, the present superintendent, came to Savanna in 1976, and some of the accomplishments since that time have been: the passing of a bond issue in the amount of \$96,000 for four added classrooms, two offices, board room, teachers lounge in the high school, seven additional classrooms carpeted and ceiling lowered with indirect lighting, carpeting in all the elementary classrooms, new aluminum bleachers, pressbox, and dressing rooms at the stadium, and the passing of a \$110,000 bond issue for a new vocational agriculture building and the addition of dressing rooms and the gymnasium.

Some statistics concerning the Savanna Public Schools presently in 1984 are: High school enrollment 159, junior high 128, elementary 193.

Faculty members in high school 14, junior high 8, elementary 9, and kindergarten 1. Special services: remedial math teacher and one teacher's aid.

School buses number five with five drivers; three custodians and two maintenance men; seven cafeteria workers and six secretaries.