Celebrating 100 Years of St. Helena High School

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On June 6, 1912, the president of Stanford University came to St. Helena and gave the dedication speech at the newly built St. Helena Union High School. This momentous occasion was the culmination of years of community effort, frustration, setbacks, and election campaigns.

From the time the first schools were founded in St. Helena in the 1870s, students only attended through the eighth grade. Education beyond grammar school was not considered important in a farming village. In 1895, the movement to provide a high school education began with an election to establish and maintain a high school district. Voters in the one-room school districts in the St. Helena area—Pope and Conn Valleys and Angwin—marked their ballots on July 17th of that year. The voters approved establishing and funding the first high school in Napa County by a four to one margin.

Thirteen residents from each district formed the first school board, with a mandate to choose the site and name the school. Board members included Rev. James Mitchell (Presbyterian Church), Frank Mackinder (owner of the *St. Helena Star)*, and Dr. Samuel McCurdy. However, the Napa County Board of Supervisors declared on September 9, 1895 that the vote was illegally conducted and refused to levy the school tax. School was supposed to have started a week later.

Believing that every youth should have the opportunity for a high school education, a group of citizens began fundraising and organizing high school classes at the Presbyterian Church. Professor C. C. Swafford was the teacher. Furniture and supplies were bought or donated, and Union High School of St. Helena opened on September 23, 1895 with 28 students. Rev. Mitchell offered a prayer imploring divine guidance for the new institution. When an American flag with 45 stars was given to the school, the students cut down a large fir tree and created a flagpole from which to hang it. The students' first publication was the *High School Record*, a literary pamphlet.

On August 6, 1897, another vote was held on whether to unify St. Helena, Lodi, and Vineland elementary school districts into one high school district. The measure passed by six votes. Again the board members looked for quarters for the school. It was decided to hold classes in the old German gymnastics club, Turnverein or Turner Hall (today Lyman Park). The former saloon, two small rooms, banquet hall, and auditorium were rented from the club at a reasonable rate. The saloon smelled like tobacco and had to be aired out. The building came equipped with horizontal and parallel bars, a vaulting horse, and other athletic equipment. Due to such a close passage to establish and maintain the new school, the trustees kept taxes down by spending as little as possible to prepare the site—less than $3,000. The new high school opened on October 5th with Professor J.A. Metzler in charge. By 1900 the school was accredited in 21 subjects.

Frances Grayson Crane, who lived at what is now the Salvestrin home south of the school, willed 15 acres of her land for a new school. She died in 1908, and it took two years for her heirs to transfer the land to the school district. Principal C. H. Meeker began the campaign for a new high school building in 1909. He said the school could be built without increasing taxes by continuing the existing tax rate on a new bond, issued for $30,000.

On September 11, 1911, the school board received sealed bids to construct a building designed by Soderberg & Company in Oakland. The trustees met later to open the bids, which were in excess of the money available, so all were rejected. The architect then revised the plans to cut costs, and bids were again requested.

The contract was awarded to the E. T. Thurston & Co of San Francisco, who began work in February 1912, with promised completion by September 1912. The building was set 315 feet from the front property line, measuring 120 X 64 feet. The first floor contained the cooking, sewing, and drafting

rooms; the wood and metal shops; and the agriculture, physical geography, science lab, and chemistry lab rooms. Lockers, showers, bathrooms, and heating were also on the ground floor. The second floor housed the principal's office, teachers' lounge, three classrooms, a typing lab, a study hall with seating for 150 students, and a library. A gymnasium and assembly halls were on the third floor. All in all, there were 19 rooms. The large property was planned for teaching elementary agriculture.

The structure was made of reinforced concrete and roofed with slate. The stone used on the outside was quarried at Glendale Ranch in Conn Valley. The stonemasons were employed by A. Martini & Company, who finished their work by mid-May 1912. The dedication date was set for June 6th.

The inaugural ceremonies began with a parade from the old high school at Turner Hall, down Main Street, to the new building. It was led by the Calistoga Brass Band, followed by a girl dressed in white, riding a black horse, and carrying the school banner. Next came the alumni and current students of the school. A large car carried the main speaker, David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University; Mr. Meeker; and faculty members, followed by a long line of wagons and autos.

For the dedication, a stage was built in the grove next to the school. Dr. Jordan said this was the most beautiful valley in the state, but that its most important products were the boys and girls educated at this school. The assembly then moved close to the building for the sealing of the cornerstone. Various souvenirs were placed in a copper box, including an issue of the *St. Helena Star* and *St. Helena Sentinel,* business cards, a photo of Mr. Meeker, and a ribbon with school colors. John H. Steves sealed the box and the capstone was lifted in place by W. D. Mooney, representing the school board.

The ceremony concluded with lots of food and beverages, and dancing into the night. Thus was born St. Helena Union High School's new building, now known as Vintage Hall.