

Higher Education in Fairmont's Past

With the advent of Presentation College, and the college classes offered through SMEC, Fairmont can now provide excellent opportunities for individuals in pursuit of college level courses and college degrees. However, did you know that Fairmont offered its citizens the opportunity to attend a business college in the early 1900's?

Professor C. R. Sweet, a graduate of Fairmont High School and the Santa Rosa Business College, opened the Fairmont Business College in 1904 with approximately 20 students attending, including several graduates of another business school that was in Fairmont.

A brochure publicizing the college stated the following: "The Fairmont Business College is an institution founded in the picturesque City of Fairmont. It is a city of 4,000 population; is the county seat of Martin County; and is almost surrounded by splendid lakes where fishing, bathing, boating, steamer riding and skating can be enjoyed." It goes on to state that "Fairmont, by virtue of its surroundings and high moral standard, is considered the best school town in the state. It is a city where you can safely send your boy or girl. It is a city where they would like to live." The brochure also goes on to advise parents not to send too much money with boys attending school, as it "materially detracts from their school work."

Professor Sweet's guiding principle of instruction, according to the December 16, 1904, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*, involved conducting actual business right from the start. He advertised his system of bookkeeping as being "that of an actual business system from the start and no time wasted by laboriously copying from dry text books, no fictitious names are used, and every transaction is bona fide." Students would pursue the following process upon entering the school: They would first go to the College Bank and negotiate a loan; then they would lease a store; next they would purchase a stock of goods for their store; and finally, they would open a set of books that "carries on an account at the bank and (the student) in every way is given an opportunity for full play of whatever commercial talent he may possess." Sweet went on to say that in some instances the student prospered. He also stated that occasionally, students would meet with reverses and go into bankruptcy, settling with creditors in accordance with the bankruptcy laws of the time.

The College National Bank was exactly like other national banks of its time. It was equipped with bank fixtures, an ample supply of currency, and would issue pass books, checks, and drafts. It also conducted a money order post office.

One interesting aspect observed by Professor Sweet was that “the penmanship of the students is a revelation as to what the school can accomplish in that time. In every instance the student has acquired an easy and clear business handwriting.”

The tuition, payable in advance, was \$50.00 for six months, \$10.00 for a single month, and \$10.00 for books and supplies. In addition, the school offered a “no risk” free trial to students. Anyone not satisfied with the school would receive a refund of their first month’s tuition. The school also advertised board and lodging in private homes at a cost of \$2.50 per week and up. His advertisements stated that six months should make the average student a competent and reasonably capable accountant.

Professor Clyde Sweet’s Fairmont Business College was located on the second floor of the Clark Haines building. This is where Fairmont Electric and Hardware was once located, and is now the site of the El Mariachi restaurant.

In addition to the Fairmont Business College, two other business colleges started in Fairmont in the early 1900’s: Toland’s in 1901 and the Fairmont Practical Business College in 1916. Toland’s, of La Crosse, Wisconsin, was short lived. The Fairmont Practical Business College, opened by the Randall brothers from Iowa, did not last long either. It started with an enrollment of 50 students and added more during the school year, however, only two graduated.

Although the Fairmont Business College was quite heavily advertised by Sweet as being well equipped, up to date, and would increase your salary by as much as \$10.00 per month, he eventually abandoned it to run for county superintendent of schools.

To learn more about the history of education in Fairmont and Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.