

## Fairmont's Second High School

In 1866 a committee was formed to pick a permanent site to build a school in Fairmont. Three lots, where the Southern Minnesota Educational Campus (SMEC/home of Presentation College) is presently located, were selected and purchased from O. P. Chubb for one dollar. The high school was started in 1886 with the first separate high school building erected in 1900, also on the current SMEC location.

Fairmont's second High School occupied the site of what is now Veteran's Park. It was built in 1915 at a projected cost of \$125,000.00. The project was not without its share of obstacles, one of which was that in 1913 the voters defeated a proposal to raise \$100,000.00 to build the school. Ironically, the following year a petition was delivered to the school board to raise \$125,000.00 for the proposed new high school. During the meeting in which the school board was to act on the petition, the only substantive discussion involved whether or not more funding, up to \$150,000.00, might be necessary. A vote was subsequently held in October of that year, the results of which were 208 voting in favor and 47 voting in opposition.

The site of the school was also up for debate. Its location was finally determined by a special election held by the board of education. A large delegation from the north side proposed that its location be on the block bound by Hampton on the east, Second Street on the south, Prairie Avenue on the west, and Third Street on the north. The board accepted their choice concluding that they would purchase the entire block for that purpose.

The purchase of the block, however, included another obstacle. Residents of the block were asking \$36,000.00, which the board felt to be too high. Consequently, the board started proceedings to acquire the block through condemnation. An appraisal board made up of H. P. Edwards, Henry Rippe, and H. C. Nolte was appointed. The condemnation proceedings set the value of the property at \$25,000.00, rather than the \$36,000.00 asked by the owners. Property owners on the block finally relented, stating that they did not want to stand in the way of progress regarding education in the city.

Bids were let in June of 1915 with thirteen contracts being awarded totaling \$121,974.00.

The new school building was to be the best of its kind in the northwest. Some of the innovative measures utilized in that era that were incorporated into this structure included thermostatically controlled fresh air exchanges and the fireproofing of all floors, corridors, and vestibules.

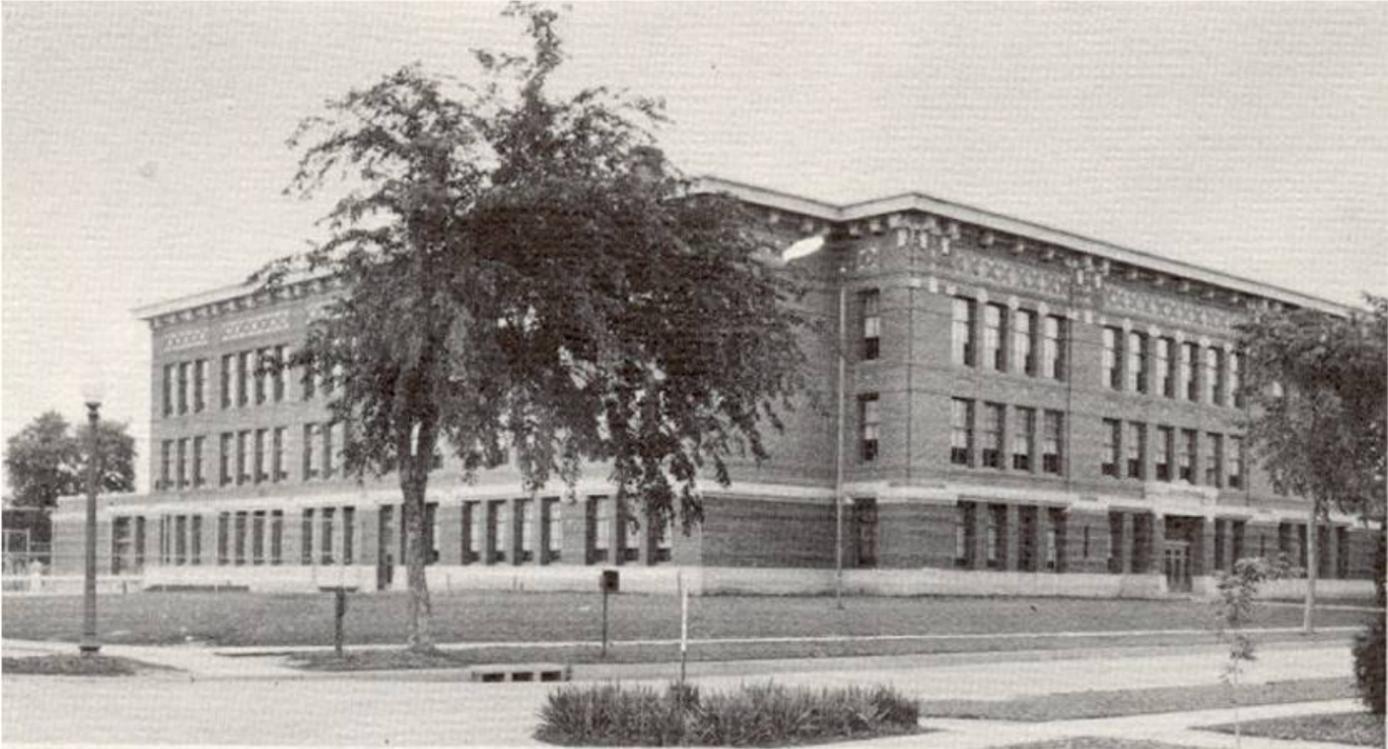
The school was characterized as a “model for educational institutions” with lockers set in built-in spaces along the corridors and having a new auditorium capable of seating a thousand spectators. In 1928, Fairmont voters approved the building of a new grade school and a junior high addition on the north side of the high school, making it a combined junior and senior high school. It eventually evolved into a full junior high school when the third high school was built in 1956 on Victoria Street.

The school served Fairmont students from 1915 until it succumbed to fire in 1969. The fire that claimed the junior high school in that year took place in two phases. The first fire was discovered by a Fairmont policeman and was basically confined to a basement storage area. There was minimal damage and students were able to return to school within two days of the fire. The cause of the fire was undetermined at that time. The second fire took place exactly one week later and resulted in the demise of the building.

As a result of the fire, the district’s administrative offices were relocated to the Crystal Bottling Company and the nearly 700 junior high students were to find out that they would be attending high school much sooner than they had anticipated. The “split shift,” as it was referred to at that time, was held at the Fairmont High School on Victoria Street, currently the Fairmont Elementary School. Senior high students attended classes from 7:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. and junior high students held classes from 1:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. A twenty minute break was scheduled for midmorning and midafternoon with no hot lunch program being provided. Six rooms at Grace Lutheran Church were also made available for some classes until temporary buildings were constructed on the school site. The Superintendent at that time, Lester H. Baumann, referenced the fact that nearly every church in Fairmont contacted him to help. Offers for help were also received from other communities in the county.

Many former students and teachers will no doubt recall the era of the “split shift,” the challenges it posed as well as the successes that were achieved. Although this set of circumstances provided a less than ideal educational setting for those involved, everyone seemed to survive. In this challenging situation, students, teachers, administrators, parents, the school board, and the public worked together to reach a positive outcome – that being the education of the students impacted by that series of events.

For more information, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont or its website at [www.fairmont.org/mchs](http://www.fairmont.org/mchs)



**Fairmont High School**  
Fairmont, Minnesota  
1915 — 1969



High School Fairmont Minn 1812

# Junior high burns--almost

22 Sep 1969

By LARRY ANDERSON

Sentinel Staff Writer

"Another hour and we could have had a new building," moaned a Fairmont Junior high school student this morning as he was chased from the soot-covered halls of the school by Supt. Lester W. Baumann.

The students are on an unscheduled vacation today following an early morning fire that caused extensive smoke and water damage to the old 3-story structure.

Firemen were called to the scene about 1 a.m. today following a report by Police patrolman Gary Stevens, who smelled smoke while on regular patrol. The actual fire was confined to a basement storage area under the auditorium in the 1928 addition of the building. While Supt. Baumann urged curious students to go home and rake their lawns, the school's custodial staff was preparing for a massive cleanup operation. The halls and classrooms, all redecorated this summer, were covered with a gooey layer of black soot.

Desks, books, lockers and virtually everything else in the building show signs of the fire. Ventilating fans were

put to work as soon as the fire was extinguished in an effort to rid the building of its barbecue-like aroma.

The fire produced enough heat to crack the concrete floor in the auditorium directly above the area of the blaze. That floor was still hot at 9 a.m. today.

All stage props used in school dramatic presentations and other items stored in the room were destroyed. The flames did not go beyond the basement of the building.

Baumann expressed praise and gratitude for Fairmont firemen. "I saw these firemen in action and they showed all the strength possible," he said. "They were all business and prevented the damage from becoming much more serious," he said. "About 3 a.m. the auxiliary arrived with coffee and donuts. The efforts of these people made me very grateful," Baumann said.

The entire cost of replacement of the damaged areas and of the cleanup will be covered by the school district's insurance, he said.

Baumann reported the smoke was so thick that "you couldn't tell the auditorium lights were on." The superintendent says he made two attempts to reach his office during the fire, but was turned

back by smoke both times. Firemen, wearing masks, were finally able to reach the administrative offices to open windows and clear the smoke.

"We have always taken special precautions with fire drills in this building," Baumann said as he toured the original 1915 portion of the structure. Fire prevention signs are displayed on bulletin boards and fire exit information is attached to the doors of each classroom.

Roger Tanquist, junior high principal, says the state fire marshal was due today for his annual inspection of the building.

Tanquist kicked out a window to reach his office and remove the student records. "I knew if the fire ever reached this part (the 1915 section of the building) it wouldn't last long," he said this morning.

While the principal was bringing the records back into his office this morning, he also acted as an information bureau for curious students.

"How bad is the fire?" shouted a grinning boy from his bicycle.

"Not too bad," answered the principal. "Oh," replied the student in less than joyful tones.

"It scares you when you think the building may have been full of kids," says Tanquist. "Of course, the fire might have been discovered earlier if the building had been occupied," he added.

Diane Meschke, 13, with books in her arms, strolled undetected past the milling teachers and administrators to her locker. After brushing "dust" from the locker door she entered an empty classroom and sat, waiting for classmates to join her. Unaware of the excitement only a couple of hours before,

she was finally told there would be no school today.

Many teachers learned about the fire only after arriving at the building this morning. "What's that awful smell," asked Dean Lindsay as he walked in the door. Like other teachers, Lindsay checked his classroom to find everything "messy" and in need of scrubbing.

While teachers were preparing to help with the cleanup, one remarked, "It's a pity they didn't let her burn."

A load of lumber for the woodworking shop was stacked near one of the north doors of the building. "If the delivery hadn't been made on Saturday, all this lumber would have been in the area of the fire," Baumann said.

As the bells were sounding in the nearly empty building, the custodial staff mapped "strategy plans" for the huge task ahead. "First we will clean the offices so our staffs can get back to work," reports Tanquist, "then the halls and finally the classrooms."

## Blaze forces hearing change

A public hearing on the Fairmont public schools budget, originally scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Junior High School Library, will be held at the same hour, but in the Senior High School.

Supt. of schools L.H. Baumann said smoke damage in the Junior High library from this morning's fire necessitated changing the hearing to the Senior High cafeteria.

# Fire wins 2nd round

By LARRY ANDERSON

Sentinel Staff Writer

A strange feeling of familiarity hung over the area surrounding Fairmont's Junior High School early today.

The building that stubbornly withstood flames and smoke exactly a week ago made another gallant attempt, but lost to greater odds.

This time the blaze had a head start on firemen and destroyed the third floor of the building's 1915 section. The roof crashed into the classrooms below.

The first and second floors were also severely damaged. Water gushed through the open roof, ran down the walls and through the ceilings into the first floor. Some rooms in the 1928 section that escaped today's fire now stand ankle deep in water. Walls that were scrubbed by crews working around the clock last week are again stained.

The building housed 692 junior high students and the district's administrative offices. Included in the building

are 21 general classrooms and a library. The library and all its contents were destroyed.

School officials were meeting throughout the day in an effort to assess the damage and make preparations for resuming classes in temporary quarters. The building and contents were insured at replacement costs, according to Supt. Lester Baumann.

H.E. Thomas, assistant state fire marshal, arrived in Fairmont a few minutes before 6 a.m. today to assist in investigating the blaze. "It is entirely too early to speculate on possible causes of the fire," Thomas said after inspecting the charred interior.

School officials were unable to put a figure on the amount of damage caused by the 5-hour blaze.

Fire Chief Don Simmons said the investigation of the fire would take some time because of the extensive damage in the area of the fire's origin.

The flames were believed to have started in the library.

"The roof had fallen into the old gym when we got here," Simmons said. "The flames were already 50 feet in the air."

Firemen arrived about 1 a.m. and fought until dawn to contain the blaze to the south portion of the building. They were aided by Welcome and Truman departments, while Jackson firemen stood by in reserve at Jackson.

Flames leaping down the roof of the 3-story structure cast an orange glow over the city for several hours. About 1:30 a.m. the flames became brighter and soon the orange glow was evident through windows on the third floor.

"It's got to be some nut starting these things," grumbled a woman.

"I wonder if my kid left his horn in school," questioned a man with a topcoat over his pajamas.

Robert Volk sat on the steps of his home at 408 East Second, directly across from the fire, as the crowds began to gather on his lawn.

"I had my dog out at five minutes to twelve," Volk said. "Everything seemed alright then."

Most of the important records kept in the offices were removed by 1:45 a.m. Roger Tanquist, high school principal, removed records from his office for the second time in a week through the same window.

"We got most of the records," Tanquist said, "We knew how to do it after last week."

By 2 a.m. any hope of saving the building looked slim. Flames were roaring through the roof on the east side and police speakers warned the growing number of spectators to move back from the building.

"I never thought it would burn like that," said Elwin Schaefer. "I played basketball in that old gym many years ago," he said. "Once back in the twenties a championship team played there."

"There goes room 304," cried a junior high student as the social studies and math rooms were being consumed by the raging blaze.

At 2:20 a.m. the ceiling fell in a third floor English room.

Firemen wearing oxygen masks were in and out of the building throughout the blaze, dodging falling debris.

The wind picked up about 2:30 a.m., blowing from the southeast. Firemen hosed down houses on the north side of the school as sparks drifted off the building's roof into that area. At this point the firemen and the fire appeared to be at a standoff.

By 3 a.m. a Salvation Army lunch wagon dispatched from Albert Lea arrived on the scene to aid local firemen's auxiliary in dispensing hot coffee and sandwiches.

Many upper story windows would not yield to either the intense heat or attempts by firemen to break them with

rocks and hoses. At 3:15 Policeman Gordon Pederson fired a blast from a police shotgun into the windows. The sound of gunfire continued until 6 a.m. as policemen continued to "open" windows for firemen, so hoses could be trained on flames inside.

About 3:45 a.m. the wind again shifted and remained unsteady before calming moments later. By 4 a.m. firemen had the blaze contained in the area south of the old gym.

A firewall between the 1915 and 1928 additions is credited with preventing flames from reaching the newer addition. Firemen had the flames pretty well extinguished by 6 a.m. Smoldering ruins in the old gym continued to burn at 9 a.m. this morning.

LeRoy Nesmoie, 13, a junior high student, said he was "going to kind of miss the old building." "It's lucky it didn't happen when the school was full of people," he said.

Ken Allen, 13, also a student in the charred building said, "LeRoy woke me at 3:45 a.m. and told me the school was on fire again. I didn't believe him at first."

Both boys said they expected to play football until classes

resume.

As the morning sun revealed the real damage to the building, firemen began collecting some 7,000 feet of hose that snaked in and out of the building and across the school grounds.

## Firemen pump plenty of water

The Fairmont water department had no trouble keeping up with the fire department's demands, which reached about 50,000 gallons an hour when Truman and Welcome fire trucks hooked on.

The filtration plant pumps, capable of up to 180,000 gallons an hour, were off when the fire started. They were turned on at about 1:30 a.m.

# Blaze in brief:

<sup>22 Sep 1969</sup>  
**DISCOVERED BY** — Police patrolman Gary Stevens, who smelled smoke while on patrol, at 1 a.m. today.

**SERIOUS DAMAGE** — confined to a storage area in the basement under auditorium. Stage props stored in the area were among items destroyed.

**SMOKE AND WATER DAMAGE** — was heavy throughout entire three floors of building. All walls and floors are coated with soot.

**STUDENTS** — have at least a one-day vacation, depending on speed of cleanup operations.

**TEACHERS** — took a look at their soot-covered classrooms this morning and then prepared to join in the giant cleanup task.

**THE BUILDING** — built in 1915, with an addition in 1928, was not damaged structurally. The 3-story building houses 21 classrooms and junior high and district administrative offices. Fire was in the 1928 section.

**INSURANCE** — will pay the costs of cleaning the building and replacing the destroyed facilities.

**Sentinel  
photos by  
Bob Schroeder**



Asst. Fire Chief Tom Covers looks over smoked-filled junior high auditorium