

The Old Benton School in Green County

A few years ago my friend, Robert Ault, asked me if I might be interested in a small record book from the Benton School district with the earliest record dating back to 1845. Knowing that Benton was not in Green County, I told him that I would get it to the Lafayette County Historical Society. What a surprise to find that the book was actually from Clarno Township!

Clarno district 2, later known as Clarno Townhouse School, had previously been known as Benton. A school census, taken in 1845, showed 28 children between the ages of four and 16. Heads of the household at that time were Matthew, Peter, and William Wells, John Blunt, George Smith, Isaac Callendar, Simeon Forbes, Hamilton C. Miller, Gabriel Long, James Crouch, Abel Welch, William Tucker, and George Elsey. The district hired Jabez Johnson to teach school for seven months that year for \$13 per month. It is unknown where the school was located or when it was built. In October 1845, they hired William Wells to do some repairs to the door and windows of the school as well as "daub the inside with lime," paying him \$5.50.

The annual census showed that the district had grown to 59 children, 26 males and 33 females, by August 1851. The district received \$63.25 from the township superintendent and raised \$200 to build a new schoolhouse plus another \$40 to pay their debts. Amos Eastman was hired to build the new school for \$85. The records are difficult to decipher, but it appears that he was paid two installments of \$40 and \$62.33 in September and then another \$50 in October. The old school building was sold for \$3 to the highest bidder, Hamilton Miller. They voted to have four months of school starting on November 15 with a male teacher. A Miss Smith was hired to teach 3 months in the spring starting in May for \$8 a month. The following year they expended \$6.25 to supply their library.

The board met at the townhouse in October 1858 where they decided to move the old school from its previous location to a lot near the townhouse, now at W6110 County B. It is necessary to mention now that the townhouse is the red brick building facing County B and never served as a school. The school building is just northeast of the townhouse, amidst the mobile homes that still remain. The land records show that this half-acre lot was not transferred from the Town of Clarno and the State of Wisconsin to the school district until April 26, 1860.

At the same meeting in 1858, Peter Wells offered to furnish enough sawed, seasoned hardwood to heat the school for the year for \$12.75. It was to be split and ready for the stove. Money was also set aside for repairs to the building and \$90 for teacher wages.

Jacob Mason was hired to make some small repairs to the old building in the mid-60s before he was hired to build a new schoolhouse on July 25, 1867 for which he was paid \$313 on January 1, 1868. Peter Wells, who owned the property across the intersection to the southeast, paid \$20 for the former schoolhouse. There is some discrepancy as to whether the building that now stands is the same one that was built in 1867. An article in the *Monroe Evening Times* in 1948 stated that the building had served as a school since 1874. Yet, an article in the *Green County School Bulletin* of February 1924 stated that the building had been destroyed by fire within the prior ten years. We may never know what might have been someone's poor memory or a misprint in a news article.

The school closed after the 1938-39 school year as the state changed the law so there would be no state aid for schools with less than ten students. Students on the east part of the district were transferred to the West Clarno district; students on the west side attended Enterprise School. The Townhouse district had to pay \$39.15 and \$107.40, respectively, to the other districts for the year.

At their annual meeting each year residents had to vote whether they should reopen the school. They voted 18 to 12 to keep the school closed on July 31, 1944. They voted on July 14, 1947 to shingle the south side of the schoolhouse.

The building was sold to Robert S. Shafer on September 8, 1948 for \$1,200. Even though the building had not been used as a school, it had been a home for the Edwin Lindsay family. In 1953 they had unpaid tuition bills of \$860.08 to Monroe, \$362.53 to Enterprise, and \$502.42 to Roosevelt. John Christen, clerk, also contacted Irene Powers that year to see if the students from this district could attend the Green County Normal School. That enrollment was already too large.

The Fairview Cheese Company on the corner of Bethel and Melvin Roads and the Wuetrich farms, one to the east and one to the south of the factory, were detached from this district and attached to

Roosevelt in April 1954. The farms of Mike McGuire, Leonard Krause, R. L. Hasse, and two of Mrs. Thersea Zibung were attached to the Goodrich district. Properties owned by Pelmer Albright, George Bidlingmaier, Clarno Center Cheese Co, the George Eaton estate, Mrs. Lena Hartwig, Fred Maurer, Rudy Maurer, Robert Sommerfeldt, Mrs. F. N. Tyler, and Charles Vogel were attached to the Enterprise district. Those properties owned by John Christen, William Grant, Mrs. Dora Drake, Julius Hartwig, Sr., Marcus Hoesly, Frank Koch, John Koehner, Earl Morton, Chester Schaffer, and Fred Selck were attached to the West Clarno district.



This photograph came from the collection of the late Pauline Wittwer Morton, who taught at the Clarno Townhouse from 1934 to 1939, the last five years that it was open. It shows some of the people who attended the year-end picnic in May 1936 showing the schoolhouse in the background. If you are able to identify any of the people in the photograph, please contact Matt.

Shafer sold the corner in 1951 to Pelmer and Jessie Albright, who remodeled it and operated a mobile home park around it. The former schoolhouse still serves as a home today.