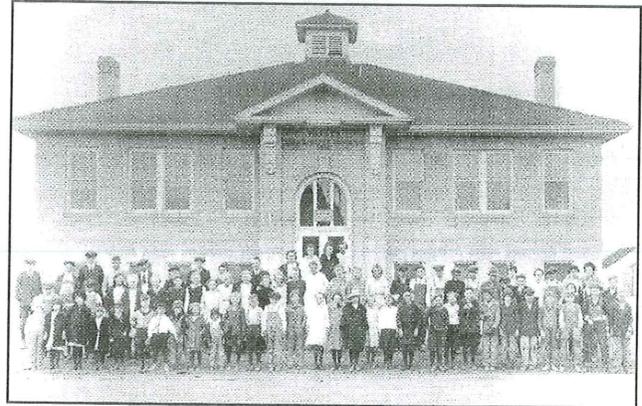


Old School Building Once at the Center of Community Tension

By: *The Town of Parker Historic Preservation Commission*

August 1958 was a difficult month for Parker, Colorado. That last month of summer began with a depressing declaration and ended with a painful event. At the heart of both edict and incident was the town's schoolhouse. That August marked the beginning of the end of the most useful days for the Parker Consolidated School Building.



The sturdy, two-story structure on the east side of town (presently at 19650 E Mainstreet) was over 40 years old back in 1958. Completed in 1915, the brick veneer schoolhouse was a rather unique and even tall building for a town predominated by one-story wooden houses and businesses. The land on which it was built had been a portion of the original homestead of George Parker, brother of the town's namesake, James Parker.

Thirty eight students filed into their brand new building for that 1915 session. They arrived on horses, mules, and even horse-drawn school buses, representing not only multiple grades – elementary through high school – but multiple communities, too. The Pine Grove School had consolidated with those in Allison and Plainfield to form the Parker Consolidated School (PCS) District #37. The school in Pine Grove had serviced the Parker area at its location just west of town, across Euclid Avenue (now Mainstreet) from the Twenty Mile House.

The district's new schoolhouse had two classrooms and an auditorium on the upper floor and three classrooms and a lunch room on the lower one. But town growth demanded ongoing building modification. It was wired for electricity in April 1925 and telephone lines were installed in August 1927. By the early 1940s, school growth stuffed three elementary grades into each of the two first-floor classrooms. Consequently, 7th and 8th grades moved upstairs to join the high school students. Eventually the auditorium and the lunch room were remodeled into more class spaces.

A further attempt to remodel the schoolhouse led to the construction of one of Parker's most unique buildings. By a margin of only two votes, citizens failed to pass a special 1949 bond election that would have generated the funds to build a school gymnasium. The defeat of that initiative resulted in the town's construction of the storied Community Center (also known as the "Quonset Hut") in 1950. That building stood for over 50 years and served the school as the venue for its indoor athletic events.

The school itself had become the "hub of the community" by that summer of 1958, according to Gert Kordziel, member of the Parker high school class of 1951. The town Halloween party was held there, and Santa Claus arrived at the conclusion of the annual school Christmas play. Parker pride was fueled when the PCS high school boys won the Colorado Class C state baseball championship in 1953. So the news that arrived on Aug. 2, 1958 was devastating for the community: At the beginning of the upcoming school year, elementary students would remain at the Parker schoolhouse, but grades seven through 12 would be bussed to Douglas County High School in Castle Rock.

Lowell Baumunk remembers August 1958. He had been hired as the first superintendent of the new Douglas County School District. On Aug. 2, “my second day on the job,” he said, “I had to go to Parker and tell them that the high school was going to close.” The PCS District had been mandated by the State of Colorado to consolidate with the other 16 school districts in Douglas County. The state hoped that creation of the new, county-wide district would be a more efficient and cost-effective way to educate the county’s children.

However, some Parker residents did not care about efficiency or cost-effectiveness. They loved their community school – its programs, reputation, and personnel. These townsfolk were more concerned about what their community would lose as their best and brightest were loaded up and shipped off to Castle Rock. So, the first day of school, at the end of August 1958, was a painful event. As Mrs. Kordziel reflected, it was a bitter pill for Parker’s 100 residents to swallow. Mr. Baumunk even remembered that threats and rumors prompted him to travel to Parker on that day to supervise personally the loading of the buses. Thankfully, nothing happened, and all 45 of Parker’s high school students joined the 180 students of Douglas County High School.

Incidentally, that first day in a new school was difficult. As Yvonne Patterson Clarke – a sophomore in 1958 – remembered, there was a lot of apprehension among the Parker kids as they filed into the auditorium of Douglas County High School. “We were more scared than anything.” Most of the Parker students began to thrive in their new environment, though. By providing a wider range of academic and athletic opportunities, their new school enhanced rather than harmed their high school experience. Only girlfriend-boyfriend jealousy and increased athletic competition created any real tension for the Parker students! Even the most disappointed Parker parents eventually realized that the move was good for their children.

Nevertheless, the PCS schoolhouse began to fade in importance as Parker’s hub. Elementary students met in the building for another nine years, until 1967. At that time Parker voted to build a new school, Northeast Elementary, at 6598 N. State Highway 83. Consequently, the older building remained vacant for three years until 1970, when the Parker United Methodist Church purchased it. After using and maintaining it for 25 years, the Methodists sold it to the Town of Parker in 1995, to be used as the Mainstreet Center.

In 2004, one of the original classrooms was restored to its 1930’s era appearance by the Parker Area Historical Society. A glimmer of the building’s useful past can now be seen via period furnishings as well as narrative interpretations by Society members. The classroom is open to the public every Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

As with all of Parker’s landmarks, the story of the Parker Consolidated School is more than just a collection of facts about a historic building. When and how it was built is important, but of greater importance is the community it served. Parker and her schoolhouse had a relationship. The story of the town mirrors that of her old school. Her children roamed its halls, laughed in its classrooms and learned from its capable teachers. Townspeople gathered in its auditorium and took pride in its athletic teams. As the town grew, so did the building, changing in its architecture as well as its usage. And with the August 1958 transfer of its eldest students, the schoolhouse’s changing personality may have even facilitated the subsequent shrinking of its already small Colorado home town.

Yet, since the 1980s, both are thriving once again; the town as a suburban magnet for Denver residents and the building as a true community center, supporting multiple events and protecting cherished memories of past glory.