

# First schools of Baker County

First school district launched at Auburn; Baker City had Oregon's second high school

by PEARL JONES  
of the Baker City Herald

The discovery of gold in the Griffs Gulch in the fall of 1861 created another county for this newly organized state of Oregon. Baker County came into being in October of 1862 with Auburn as the county seat, and the first school district was formed with William Packwood the first school Superintendent.

Auburn's population waned as miners moved on to new fields, however, and Baker City became the county seat in 1865 as well as School District No. 5.

As Baker City grew and developed, schools were the number one priority. An Auburn teacher, Mrs. Calbreath, moved in to Baker City about 1864 and conducted a subscription school in her home on First Street between Valley Street and Auburn Avenue. In 1865 she was hired by the newly formed Baker County District No. 5 to teach in a small building at 4th and Auburn, the first official school of Baker City. Before 1865 tuition schools were held in homes and churches with few records kept of their location, attendance, curriculum and teachers.

About 1866, after three terms (three months each term), Mr. Ira M. Miller took over from Mrs. Calbreath and she moved to a newly constructed, small, unsubstantial and privately owned school building on Front Street, near the center of the 1900 block. Mrs. Calbreath taught here for an unspecified time then moved back to her Home School on First Street. The reason for this was not clear but it implied that the school in the 1900 block of Front Street was so poorly constructed that it was unsuitable for a school building.

Early in 1868 the first public school was erected facing north on Washington Street between Front and Resort streets (where the Warshauer Hotel, later the Geiser, was built in 1888). Mrs. Calbreath was once again listed as teacher.

In the summer of 1868, Miss McCrary, probably sister of the Postmaster, taught for a three months term. In the Fall of 1868 Mrs. Ferguson took over as teacher and taught until 1870. There were several interim teachers, unnamed, until Mr. McClelland filled in as teacher for 1872-73.

Meanwhile in the fall of 1869 a committee of four business men — A.H. Brown, merchant; Royal Pierce, attorney; William McCrary, postmaster and Levi Nelson, tinner — were arranging for a Baker City Academy to accommodate the growing number of students in Baker City.

As it was near completion fire leveled the building but a new structure was immediately begun.

When completed in 1870, Professor Grubb and his wife were the first teachers. Tuition was payable every 11 weeks and the Academy was a financially stable institution.

In 1872 Professor S.P. Barrett took charge of the



Submitted photograph

The St. Francis Academy was built in 1904 on Church Street between Main and First Streets. Notice St. Francis de Sales in the background of the historic photo above. The building was razed in 1970.

Academy and managed it successfully until 1875. He was succeeded by Mr. W. Harrison from '75 until '78.

This tuition Academy had been so successful that School District No. 5 had not tried to compete, but in 1871 the State gave them a parcel of land in the Boyd Addition on Baker Street between 4th and 5th Streets. A two room school was erected on this property in 1873. Little is known of this building as a school and it was sold in 1906 to a private citizen. Evidence of its use as a school was verified by finding blackboards in the walls when it was remodeled into a large residence that remains today at 2355 Baker Street.

There is some evidence that this building was used at times to house the Catholic Academy between their abandonment of the Virtue house in 1891 and the construction of the Stone Academy on Church St. between Main and 1st Streets in 1904 that was razed in 1970.

We return now to 1887 when Mr. Whitney had become the Superintendent of Baker City Schools, District No. 5.

The school district had been using the Baker City Academy building for two years after it had closed its doors in 1885 and had recently purchased both land and building.

Putting the building up for auction, it was sold for \$640 to Mr. B.W. Levens in June of 1888. He then moved it to 11th Street where it was destroyed by fire in August of 1902.

There is a small reference in our history that this building, before it burned, was used as temporary quarters for some of Baker City class rooms. That may have been in the 1890s.

Planning by the School Board of District No. 5 had begun early in 1887 for a public school building large enough to house all twelve grades in one facility.

They let a contract for a \$30,000 three story brick school building on 4th Street between Broadway and Washington Streets where the Helen M. Stack Jr. High

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stands today.

This was an imposing building, the second High School in all of Oregon; Portland had the first. Completed on January 14, 1889, the floor layout was as follows: 10 recitation rooms and a lunch room for the first and second floors with the third floor being an auditorium 40 by 86 feet, used on special occasions as an assembly room.

I attended this school for my 7th and 8th grade junior high classes in 1930 through 1933.

When we finished the 6th grade the State required every student to take an "achievement test." The 6th grades from all the Baker City elementary schools gathered in this 3rd floor assembly room to take said test. I don't remember a question on the test but I was most impressed with seeing all those kids who would be with me that fall when I attended Baker City Jr. High.

From the day in 1889 when this imposing brick school opened for public use it was always known as Baker City High School even though it housed all twelve grades.

At its opening there were 10 teachers and 606 students registered. Prof. Herbert Kitredge was in charge of the High School. Several other teachers were noted until 1892 when Prof. J.A. Churchill became City School Superintendent.

By the fall of 1896 the school enrollment had grown so large it was necessary to partition the 3rd floor assembly room into two large rooms to accommodate the High School. Miss Helen Stack taught English in the High School for two years, becoming High School Principal in the fall of 1901.

To alleviate the need for more elementary facilities, Brooklyn School was built on east Washington Street in 1900. This was followed by two others, South Baker (at one time called Tiedeman School) and North Baker. All three of these schools are still functioning in their original locations. Brooklyn and South Baker are complete replacements and North Baker has had extensive remodeling and additions.

With the building of these three elementary schools, the High School could now take back full use of their building. A small frame building had been built on the north side of the High School to be used as a supplementary classroom for those few children residing in this area. Loy Wisdom, local pioneer and author, told me she had attended this school when she was a child.

Under the guidance of School Superintendent Churchill, Baker City Schools became known as some of the best in Oregon. By 1904 the staff of teachers had increased from 10 to 36 and school registration from 606 to 1,800. The High School now carried a full four years of courses of study, an excellent Library and a fully equipped laboratory with all the necessities for first class instruction. Athletics and Oratorical contests provided extracurricular activities as well as academics.

The schools of Baker City continued to be progressive and reputable. Professor Churchill resigned in 1913 to go on to greater heights of accomplishment in the Oregon educational field.

In 1916 as the original High School was beginning to show its age a replacement was planned and built of native



Submitted photograph

The Baker School District tripled in size under Prof. J.A. Churchill, for whom Churchill School is named.

stone. Facing Washington Street between 5th and 6th Streets it is now the annex to the Helen M. Stack Junior High and Middle School.

This is the same stone building where I attended four years of High School and one class of 1936 was the first one to hold our graduation exercises in the new Helen M. Stack gymnasium. Another item of special interest to me was the fact that my father had helped build this school in 1916 before I was born.

Another elementary school was built in 1926 in west Baker City to honor Prof. Churchill and was known as Churchill Elementary School. Today this building houses the 6th grade classes of Baker City Public schools.

(Editor's note: Churchill School closed Thursday and won't reopen in the fall due to budget cuts).

The 3 other elementary schools take care of Kindergarten and the first elementary grades.

Pearl Jones is a local historian who writes on Baker County history.