

Wasco Union High School District

In 1898, the San Francisco and San Joaquin Valley Railroad established a depot some 25 miles northwest of Bakersfield and named it Dewey, then later Deweyville, in honor of Admiral George Dewey, a hero in the Spanish American War. Soon a small trading center that included a grocery store, a blacksmith shop, and two saloons grew up around the depot. A post office was established in October of 1899 with the rail agent, Arthur Weaver, serving as postmaster. The opening of the post office led to the discovery that another town called Dewey already existed and a year later the name of the little village was changed to Wasco.

It is generally agreed that the town's new name was suggested by Jimmy Bonham, the foster child of a local family and, by birth, a member of the Wasco Indian tribe of Oregon. There is scant agreement, however, among those who offer opinions as to the English translation of "wasco." Some say it means "hot" which would be appropriate given the climate of the region, but it may also mean "a large body of water" or even "a cup or small bowl made of bone."

The Wasco Colony was founded in 1907 through the efforts of the Kern County Board of Trade. The Board of Trade persuaded M.U. Hartcraft, head of a Los Angeles based land agency called the California

Home Extension Association, to purchase nine sections of land from the Kern County Land Company for development. After acquiring title to the three square miles of mostly raw land, the developers began a nationwide advertising campaign promoting the sale of both village lots and farm lots in what they called the Wasco Colony. The lots were sold at auction in the association's Los Angeles offices on February 6, 1907. Raw land sold for \$50 to \$100 per acre and "improved" property for as much as \$200 per acre. During the summer of that year more than two hundred families arrived at the colony to settle on their newly acquired parcels of land, in most instances without ever having seen the property beforehand. Almost immediately the availability of water became a major concern since the purchase price did not include water rights. Many settlers ended up leaving and those who opted to stay found life very difficult for the next several years.

In spite of the hardships, however, Wasco soon became a thriving community and there was even talk of incorporating. The matter was put before the voters in 1922 but many residents were concerned about the effect incorporation would have on their property taxes and the measure was overwhelmingly defeated. Subsequent incorporation elections were held in 1923 and 1924 but they, too, were defeated. The matter lay

dormant for the next twenty years and it would be December of 1945 before Wasco voters consented to incorporation and the formation of a municipal government.

Two elementary school districts had been established in the area some years before the depot and the little village of Wasco even existed. The Shamrock School District, formed in 1880, was huge, at least in terms of territory. Its boundaries extended from the Kern County line on the west to a point 18 miles beyond Wasco to the east, and from the Kern County line to the north to Lerdo Highway on the south, an area of more than 1,300 square miles. The Shamrock schoolhouse was located on the south bank of Poso Creek at the junction with Whistler Road.

Note: Alfred Harrell, who would later serve as the county superintendent of schools and also as publisher of the *Bakersfield Californian*, taught at the Shamrock School from 1883-1885.

The Delta School District, with territory wholly within the boundaries of the Shamrock district, had been formed on May 2, 1892. Following a successful \$4,000 bond election in October of that year, the Delta district built a schoolhouse at the corner of Kimberlina Road and Central Valley Highway, now the site of the offices for the Wasco-Shafter Irrigation District.

Neither of these districts ever served more than a handful of

students. Faced with closure because of low and declining enrollment, the two districts joined together in 1906 to form the Delta-Shamrock School District. A few years later the Delta-Shamrock schoolhouse was moved to the Wasco townsite and the district was renamed the Wasco School District. In 1918, as a result of having absorbed the tiny Elmo School District, it was designated a "union" district, and was thus renamed Wasco Union School District.

Note: Wasco had another school, the Colony School, about which little is known or can be discovered. It was located south of the townsite but details as to where it was located, when it was built, and how long it was in existence are murky. A photograph of the schoolhouse, found in the district archives, suggests that it was a one-room frame structure, small in size and of coarse construction. History records that Karl Clemens was hired to teach at the Colony School in 1914 but was there for just a brief time before being named principal of the elementary school in Wasco. He would go on to have a long and distinguished career as the district's superintendent, retiring in 1952. In 1962, the Wasco Union Grammar School was renamed Karl F. Clemens School in his honor.

In 1915, the voters of the Cleveland, Maple, Poplar, Wildwood, Semitropic, and Wasco elementary school districts approved the formation of a high school district for the community. Twenty-eight students were enrolled in Wasco High School that first year and classes were held in a rented auditorium-like building called Wasco Hall.

A successful \$45,000 bond election was held in December of 1915 and a portion of the funds thus generated were used to purchase a fifteen

acre school site at Trogdon ' s Corner. An adjacent three acre parcel, labeled Lot 48 of the Fourth Home Extension Colony, was also purchased.

In August of 1916 the board accepted a bid of \$44,552 for construction of the new high school building. It was completed in six months and the cost at completion was about \$50,000. Sixty-one students were enrolled at the time of the dedication on March 3, 1917. (The new high school building included both classrooms and the school offices and was in regular service until shortly before being razed in 1957.) After 1917, as new structures were added to the campus, this original building was referred to simply as the Main Building.

Wasco High School ' s first principal was John Corcoran but his tenure was quite brief. Apparently his performance did not pass muster with the board of trustees and, in April of that first year, he was given ten days notice and dismissed. Corcoran was replaced by a member of the board of trustees, Charles Hill, who withdrew from his seat on the board to take over as principal/superintendent. He would serve the district in that capacity until 1933.

In the years following the opening of the Main Building, a host of new buildings were added to the campus: an industrial arts building in 1925, an

auditorium in 1929, a gymnasium in 1931, an agricultural addition to the industrial arts building in 1934, the first phase of the science building in 1935, then the second phase in 1939. The cafeteria and a language arts building were added in 1949, a library and a music building in 1953, a new classroom building and a bus garage in 1957, and a new administration building in 1959.

Note: The PTA operated a cafeteria program from sometime in the 1920s until 1931 at which time the district assumed responsibility for food services.

The Great Depression presented difficult challenges for virtually all segments of American society and school districts were not exempt from its devastating effects. Revenue was suddenly in short supply and belt tightening became the order of the day. This was clearly the case in Wasco in 1932 when the high school district's revenues fell far short of what had been anticipated and the operating budget had to be reduced by almost a third, from \$124,000 to \$78,000. In 1936, with the community struggling because of widespread unemployment, the high school board of trustees, in an effort to provide some small measure of relief, adopted a policy of non-employment of married females so as to offer employment opportunities for men with families. In 1938, in a move that could be counted on the plus side of the Depression ledger, the Works Progress

Administration approved a federal grant that allowed the district to complete construction of the second phase of the science building.

Note: Generally referred to simply as the WPA, the Works Progress Administration was a make-work project of the Roosevelt administration that created jobs by providing federal funding for the construction and improvement of highways and bridges, schools, libraries and other public entities.

In terms of territory, Wasco is one of the larger high school districts in Kern County. Its attendance area, the western boundary being the San Luis Obispo County line, covers an area of approximately 750 square miles. Entering freshman come from four feeder elementary school districts: Wasco Union, Maple, Lost Hills Union, and Semitropic. Some students from Wasco's two private schools, St. John's and North Kern Christian School, also attend Wasco High School.

Being situated in a largely rural community, Wasco High School has for many years offered a program that places heavy emphasis on the development of both vocational and agricultural skills. Agriculture remains a major element of the school's curriculum as evidenced by the fact that some five hundred Wasco High students take agriculture related course work. Ag students have an opportunity to learn the practical aspects of agriculture on the district's 110 acre school farm which operates in conjunction with a 10 acre farm lab where instruction is provided in welding,

ag mechanics, plant science, and animal care.

Recent remodeling and updating projects are indicative of changes that have taken place in the district's curricular focus. The auto shop has been converted into two classrooms, as has the sewing room, since both of these programs have been dropped from the curriculum; the metal shop has been converted into a weight room for athletes; a rehearsal room in the auditorium now houses the computer lab; and the career and student centers have both been greatly expanded.

The district received a tech grant in 1998 that provided funding for the installation of computers in classrooms. Systems have been configured according to the state technology model and all stations have access to the internet. Assignments in the core areas of the curriculum require students to glean information from the internet and, consequently, a great deal of staff development time has been devoted to familiarizing teachers with techniques for using the computer as a teaching tool.

Most Kern County schools and school districts have experienced a dramatic change in demographics in recent years and Wasco High School is no exception. Hispanic students represented just over 71% of the total school population in 1991, this compared to almost 85% in 2006. A majority of these youngsters are identified as migrants and so are able to

benefit from the school's Migrant Education Program, funded by the federal government and administered by the office of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. The Migrant Education Program provides supplementary support designed to help these students progress and succeed in school. Sessions are held after the regular school day ends and some 65% of the Wasco High School students participate.

In 1996 the district opened Independence High School to accommodate those students who fail to thrive in a traditional classroom setting. This facility, on a separate campus, serves as a continuation school, a center for those students on independent study, and also houses the district's adult education program. In 2004, the district completed a needs assessment and demographic study that resulted in the development of a very ambitious Facilities Master Plan. Elements of the plan will be completed in three phases and will require extensive expansion and modification of existing facilities.

Phase I is projected to be completed by the winter of 2007 at an estimated cost of \$5.6 million. Among other things, this phase calls for the addition of one wing of nine modular classrooms with restrooms and technology access, the construction of asphalt basketball courts, and demolition of the existing maintenance building.

Phase II of the plan calls for the addition of a second wing of nine modular classrooms and the construction of a sports complex on district property west of Palm Avenue.

Phase III includes a third wing of nine modular classrooms and possibly a new cafeteria, gymnasium, and a multipurpose room.

No projected completion dates have been established for Phases II and III.

Note: Although the renovation projects will greatly alter the school's appearance, the old auditorium will remain the centerpiece of the Wasco High School campus. Its unique architectural splendor has been beautifully preserved and, in 1998, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The district's average daily attendance for the 1925-26 school year, ten years after first opening its doors, was 143 students. The enrollment pattern from 1925 to the present is revealed in the following figures, given in ten year increments: 1935-36 (299 students); 1945-46 (385 students); 1955-56 (546 students); 1965-66 (879 students); 1975-76 (869 students); 1985-86 (854 students) and 1995-96 (960 students). Enrollment dipped to around 650 students in the early 1980's but has grown steadily since.

Growth has been more dramatic in recent years. The CBEDS information sheet for 2000-01 recorded an enrollment of 1,126 students, for 2002-03, 1,244 students, and for 2003-04, 1348 students. Closing

enrollment for the 2005-06 school year was 1,551 students.

To help offset the burgeoning effect of the city's rapidly growing student population, developer fees of \$2.63 per square foot are assessed on all new residential construction and \$.42 per square foot on all new commercial construction. Revenues thus generated are divided between the elementary district, which receives a 65% share, and the high school district which receives the remaining 35%.

Should the district sustain its present rate of growth, projections indicate that Wasco High School's enrollment will reach 2,200 students by the year 2010. To prepare for that eventuality, the district has begun preliminary planning for a second comprehensive high school. No projected date for construction has been established but the district has purchased an 80 acre school site at Griffith and Prospect Streets.

Jack Cutner served as superintendent/principal from 1961-1980. His successors have been: Kenneth Proctor, 1980-1983; Douglas Fletcher, 1983-1987; and Thomas Blum, 1987-1990. The principal/superintendent designation was then dropped by the district and Blum served exclusively as superintendent from 1990-1997. He was replaced in 1997 by Dr. Roberta Mayor. Mayor headed up the district until June 30, 1999, at which time she was replaced by an interim superintendent, Mike Butcher, who

held that position until November 30. On December 1, 1999, Anthony Monreal was appointed superintendent and he served in that position until June 30, 2003. Butcher again served a brief stint as the interim superintendent being relieved of those duties on September 1, 2003, by the present superintendent, Elizabeth McCray