

Remembering Rogers: Maple Grove The Oldest Standing School In Rogers

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by James F. Hales Special to NWA Media

People who pass the big white church at the corner of Arkansas and Oak streets in downtown Rogers may have no idea of the building's fascinating story.

The large two-story structure, now home of Christ's Church, opened as the Fourth Ward School with 54 pupils in 1898. The school later became known as Fairgrounds School, then Maple Grove School. Many thousands of Rogers' residents attended the elementary school before it closed in 1951.

I sent a call over Facebook asking people to share their experiences or memories about this school.

Maxine McFall, who not only attended the school for grades one through six, attends Christ's Church today. "The school consisted of four classrooms -- two downstairs and two upstairs. Grades 1-2 shared a classroom along with grades 3-4 on the first floor. Upstairs were grades 5-6. I was in first grade about 1935. My teacher was Ms. Woods. Ms. Barron was my fifth-grade teacher, and Ms. Ruth Holyfield my teacher for the sixth grade," McFall said.

Frances Brown's mother attended Maple Grove School. "I remember my mother telling me that in the late 1940s, since Maple Grove didn't have a lunchroom, students were bused to Sunnyside School for lunch. This made the Sunnyside students mad because the Maple Grove kids received their food first," said Brown.

Marylin Bland Lewallen attended Maple Grove starting in 1946 and was in the last class finishing sixth grade in 1951. Outstanding teachers she remembers were Jesse Cowan and Mrs. Curry.

"After Maple Grove, I attended Rogers High School on Walnut Street. In 1956, I was married in Christ's Church, the same building where I attended grade school. Two of my classmates I remember well were Leslie Somerville and well-known artist Charles Summey."

Monte Harris, adult programs educator at Rogers Historical Museum, is extremely interested in historic buildings, especially schools, and their stories. Monte recently toured Christ's Church and noted it was the oldest standing school in Rogers.

"The first permanent public school building was built in 1888 on West Walnut Street on the site now occupied by the Rogers Public Schools administration building," said Harris. "The second was the Fourth Ward/Maple Grove/Christ's Church built in 1898."

"There were no indoor bathrooms at that time, but at some point, bathrooms were added to the school, probably in the 1930s. These original fixtures still exist in the building. There are also some beautiful original doors and woodwork. This school was brick but now covered with stucco. The building is in great condition and well worth preserving."

Maple Grove School closed in 1951. The building was acquired by a group who established the non-denominational Christ's Church in 1952.

Prominent charter members included the Reagan family, and there's an inscription carved in stone on the foundation of the church that states, "Mr. and Mrs. Z. I. Reagan, Betty Lynn and Mary Sue, Charter Members 1952, Christ's Church." The Reagans attended Christ's Church until their deaths. From 2002 until 2011, the church was led by Pastor Lon Brown, the husband of Frances Brown. Ray Zumwalt is the current pastor.

Maple Grove Park, across the street from the school, has its own unusual history. The lovely park was donated to the Rogers' School District in 1923 by the notorious white supremacy group, the Ku Klux Klan. At the time the school badly needed extra land and community leaders devised a plan to acquire the land and at the same time deal a crushing blow to the unwanted local chapter of the KKK, an organization that was spreading like wildfire across the South.

To control the organization, business leaders secured the KKK charter for Rogers and convinced the group to buy land for the school. An enormous fee of \$10 was assessed to each member and the land was purchased for \$300.

The town leaders cleverly let it be known that other assessments would be coming for additional community projects. As hoped, KKK members soon faded away, ending their influence in Rogers.

Today, Rogers is in the process of improving and widening Monte Ne Road and First Streets, which will intersect in a roundabout just north of the historic school and church. There has been concern the structure would be affected, but city planners assured me the building wouldn't be endangered by the proposed street construction..

Commentary on 05/01/2014