

# Do You Remember?

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## Livermore Public School, Livermore Grammar School, Fifth Street School, Del Valle High School

Livermore's first school was built in the late 1860s not far from Robert Livermore's home on what is today Portola Avenue. Before opening day, the community held a dance in the school to raise money for desks. The first teacher of the one-room school was Esther Weeks, who taught 13 pupils, six of them the children of one rancher. In the spring of 1869, the building was moved eastward to property on School Street.

In the following year, another one-room school building needed for the growing enrollment was erected on the same site. At first James W. Guinn taught at these two schools; when he left he recommended Francis R. Fassett, and the school board hired him to be in charge. Julia Brier, who later became Fassett's wife, was teacher of the primary department.

A problem arose with the deed to this property. William M. Mendenhall donated a different block of land, and the two school buildings were moved to the lot on Fifth Street between South I and J about 1873. As

the town grew, so did its population of children. A larger school was necessary. The two original buildings were sold and moved off the lot.

In 1876 the architect and contractor for the new school was Julius L. Weilbye. The wooden building, 50 by 80 feet, was two stories high, with four classrooms on each floor. Only the interior of the four classrooms on the ground floor was finished at first. By 1883 both floors were completely finished, and 250 students in grades one through eight attended from all over the city. There was an iron fence ran around the perimeter, a windmill supplied water from a well, sheds in the rear housed the students' horses, and a bell hung in a belfry.

The east side of the building was the boys' side, and the west side the girls' side. May Nissen remembered that whenever the students lined up to go inside, a drummer boy played a march rhythm for them. In 1891 when Livermore High School opened, Livermore Public School's name was changed to Livermore

Grammar School, since it was no longer the only public school in Livermore.

By the 1920s, the school and its outdoor wooden fire escape were in poor condition. To finance a new school, the district would have to float a bond issue. Students, parents, and other concerned citizens mounted a campaign that included a parade through town and a performance at the Sweeney Opera House, to gain city support. Leona Johnson McGlinchey said that as citizens arrived to vote at the school, students could see them through the windows, "so some of the boys would go out on the fire escape and shake the whole building to sort of give them a hint as to what should be done."

The \$115,000 bond issue passed in October 1921 by a large majority. The present concrete building was erected and opened to its first pupils on 2 October 1922. H.H. Meyers, the architect, planned to build the new structure in front of the old school.

This scheme allowed



Students marching in support of school bond issue in 1921, Livermore Heritage Guild

the children to attend school without interruption. After the wooden building was torn down, the auditorium of the new school was built in its place. Early in 1923, the school board purchased additional playground space south of the school, and Sixth Street was closed to traffic between South I and J Streets.

Meyers planned nine classrooms, each with its own adjoining cloak and hat room. The layout of the structure was in the form of an "H." Three rooms on the west side of the "H" housed domestic science, manual training, and sewing. The kindergarten room at the northeast corner still has its fireplace. Meyers designed two rooms above the main entrance to be used for community gatherings, such as the Farm Center, Health Center, or Red Cross.

The auditorium consisted of a stage and

seating for 500 people. Meyers also included a principal's office and indoor restrooms. The *Herald* said, "The architect has embraced in his plans the very latest ideas in lighting, heating, and plumbing."

In September 1943 a fire destroyed the auditorium and the two meeting rooms above the office. Temporary repairs were quickly made. By moving the kindergarten to the high school building and a first grade classroom to the Methodist church, school was able to open on schedule on September 27.

Renovations began the following summer and were completed by early 1945. Because of war shortages, the auditorium was never rebuilt. The front part of it that had been inside the "H" became the library. Perhaps at the same time, two more rooms were added to the east side of the

"H," and the sewing room became the cafeteria/multi-purpose room.

When the radiation laboratory came to Livermore, the resulting population boom necessitated additional schools; first Junction (1951) and then East Avenue (1956) were built. Now the Livermore Grammar School was no longer the only grammar school in town, so its name was changed to Fifth Street School. Fifth Street Elementary School, because of declining enrollment, closed in June 1982.

Del Valle Continuation High School took over the building in the fall of that year. I researched and wrote this column in response to Del Valle's principal, Darrel Avilla, who had questions about the old building. He took me on an interesting tour of the school several days ago.

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