

# History of the Erskine School

By Nancy Keffeler

Sturgis, also formerly known as “Scooptown,” was founded on October 25, 1878. The town is located 1 ½ miles west of Fort Meade. At the time Fort Meade was a 10-company post, six of cavalry and four of infantry, which poured about \$40,000 monthly into “Scooptown.” It was called “Scooptown” because soldiers from camp came to town and businesses would “scoop” them of their money. Sturgis was named in honor of Lieutenant “Jack” Sturgis.<sup>1</sup>

On November 19, 1887, the Sturgis train depot was completed and the first Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley train line began rolling in on a regular basis connecting Sturgis “with the outside world.” The railroad from Sturgis up Boulder Creek to Lead was the only practical railway to the gold belt.<sup>2</sup> According to the Sturgis census, the city’s population grew steadily:

1880 – 60	1890 – 668	1900 – 1,100
1905 – 1,329	1910 – 1,739	1915 – 1,029
1920 – 1,250	1930 – 1,747	1940 – 3,008
1950 – 3,471	1960 – 4,639	1970 – 4,536 <sup>3</sup>

The city’s location at the mouth of Boulder Canyon, adjacent to Fort Meade, and in the beautiful Black Hills made it ideal for settlement. Agriculture, thriving local business, active community organizations, and a local school also attributed to the growth of Sturgis.

In 1878, the Methodist Church began its religious work. A Sunday school was organized and held from house to house.<sup>4</sup> In 1882, the Catholic Church was built followed by St. Martin’s Academy in 1883. The Presbyterian Church was organized in 1886 followed by the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in 1887.

Education was at the forefront of issues facing the settlers. Before Meade County was established, Sturgis was a part of Lawrence County. The School District Number Twelve of Dakota Territory, Lawrence County, was organized in 1879.<sup>5</sup> Until 1884, the boundaries of District No. 12 were questionable. Max Hoehn, District Clerk, on March 31, 1882, reported “It is a fact that the boundaries of the district are not known to the school board – and that the county assessor did not report to the district clerk the total valuation of taxable property in this District for either 1881 or 1882”<sup>6</sup> The available data shows that the Meade County boundaries established in 1884 have not been changed to this day.

In the spring of 1879, the first 3-month school term was held in a small frame building on Lazelle St. “Mrs. Emma Rodebank was Sturgis’ first teacher. She had a class of 20 pupils when school was first held here in the summer of 1879. Rodebank died in 1938.” Teachers at that time were paid \$50 per month.<sup>7</sup> The second 3-month term in the fall was held in a log cabin on Lazelle St.

In the spring of 1880, it was decided that a “proper” school was needed for the children in the area. In 1881 a building measuring 25 by 50 was constructed near St. Martin’s Academy. Unfortunately, the school board had not purchased the ground on which the building was built, so it had to be moved to where the middle school now resides on Cedar Street.<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Moody purchased the site for the new school for \$300 and included all of Block 5.

In 1889, a new school was built where Erskine now stands for a cost of \$7,983. The first class to graduate from the two year accredited high school was in 1897. In 1896 another building was built where the Primary School building now stands. With the population rising, in 1898 the Board of Education had to build an addition to the main

school house and rent another building from the Benevolent Hall.<sup>9</sup> Just a few months later on October 24, 1900, fire destroyed the school. It reportedly started from an overloaded furnace. The loss was estimated at \$18,000. Insurance covered \$10,000 of that. The Primary School building was saved from most damage.<sup>10</sup>

On December 10, 1900, the contract to build the new school was awarded to Grams & Co. Classes continued at Primary and several different halls, until the new main building was constructed in 1901. "The school, which contained about a dozen classrooms, was built of locally quarried sandstone by Grams & Co. of Sturgis. The entire building cost \$10,150."<sup>11</sup> "Built in 1901, after a 1900 fire destroyed the old building, this school served elementary and high school students until 1936 when a new high school was built. Erskine continued to be home to the lower grades [until January 2009]."<sup>12</sup>

School attendance was sporadic in the early years. Often children were needed at home for chores or parents did not send them due to bad weather. H. H. Lorrimer, the first male teacher employed in 1884, put this notice in the Sturgis Weekly Record: "Your children are late in the morning and at noon. This is a nuisance to my school which you can easily remove. Please rise a little earlier, be more prompt in sending them and send them every day. Some come 45 minutes late; they are behind their classes. This is your fault and their misfortune."<sup>13</sup>

In 1911, an addition was added to accommodate the rise in student numbers from 300 in 1901 to 440 in 1911. The first addition was completed on March 4, 1912, following a \$12,000 bond issue.<sup>14</sup>

In 1926, another addition to the building was dedicated adding a gymnasium and additional class rooms.<sup>15</sup> The second addition was dedicated on September 24, 1926,

financed by a \$40,000 bond issue.<sup>16</sup> The Erskine building at the time housed the entire Sturgis school system including some students from Fort Meade and the country. “Old photos often show Erskine School sitting atop a barren hill overlooking early Sturgis. There were no trees or landscaping anywhere near the sandstone structure.”<sup>17</sup>

“The school was named after Rev. Carroll D. Erskine, a longtime Presbyterian minister in Sturgis.”<sup>18</sup> Erskine was also president of the Sturgis Board of Education for many years.<sup>19</sup> Carroll D. Erskine moved to “Scooptown” in June of 1906 from Chicago. He was to fill in for the summer only at the pastorates of Presbyterian mission churches in Sturgis and Whitewood. He ended up staying 47 years. Madge Mercer moved to Sturgis from “east of the river” to teach 7th and 8th grade at the Erskine school. Madge taught for 3 years until her marriage to Erskine.<sup>20</sup> The Erskines were known as generous and warm people. Some 25 high school boys and girls from the country boarded with them over the years while attending school in Sturgis.

Many personal stories of the Erskine school and its employees are known by 38-year veteran teacher Marshall Williams. He shares the following story: “In the late thirties the custodian of the Erskine School, Bill Mance, had had an interesting past. He was born in 1863 and his family came to Sturgis from North Dakota in 1880 to ranch. In August of 1885, Bill watched a mob take Corporal Ross Hallon, a black trooper with the 25th Infantry, to a tree across from Hubbard Mill on West Main where he was hanged. Hallon had been charged with killing Dr. Lynch in Sturgis. Mance had many stories of how rough Sturgis was at that time. Mance, was according to Erskine Principal R.B. Williams, a good janitor.”<sup>21</sup>

Over the years, the utilization of the Erskine School changed. On January 4, 1937, 275 high school students moved out of Erskine to attend school at the site of the current

Williams Middle School north building.<sup>22</sup> The Grunwald building was added just south of this building and housed high school students from 1937 to 1979. The current site of the high school east of the city of Sturgis adjacent to Fort Meade was built in 1979.

A new Primary School building was completed in 1954 at a cost of \$184, 947. In 1963, Francis Case and Badger Clark elementary schools were built.<sup>23</sup> Francis Case Elementary School was built by MA Garland Construction Company. Grade school principal, Ivan Peterson said that 2 first grade and 2 second grade classes will occupy the building. Each class will average 27 students.<sup>24</sup>

When Erskine became grades 1-8 in 1937, the grade school took over the School Safety Patrol, which was started in 1934 by Superintendent Emil Grunwald. The School Safety Patrol originally included boys from grades 7-12 and when the high school moved, the program dropped to grades 7 and 8. The safety patrol wore uniforms consisting of a military style hat and a shoulder belt with badge with their rank. The patrol's job was to go to intersections within several blocks of the school and control crossings before and after school. They worked closely with city police and reported reckless drivers. They were very helpful to students, especially the little ones, and received a certificate signed by the governor. As successful as it was, this program had to be dropped in the 1960's due to liability issues.<sup>25</sup>

In February, 1950, the 1895 Primary building was sold to the Sturgis Scout Committee for \$631. The building was moved to make room for an enlarged playground for the Erskine School. With a \$138,000 bond issue and federal aid from the US Government, an addition was added to the high school and a new Primary School was built

to the south of the Erskine playground in 1954.<sup>26</sup> Student enrollment at the Sturgis Independent School District in 1952-1953 was its largest at 945 students.

Also about 1950, the teachers and the principal Richard Williams at Erskine noted there were a number of students in attendance who had poor lunches--sometimes none--brought from home. At that time there seemed to be a pretty high number of families without a lot of resources. The school set up a really basic food program. Tickets could be bought in the home rooms and students would receive milk and soup at lunch. Lunch was served on the balcony above the gym and although it wasn't fancy--bean soup, tomato soup, noodle soup, etc. the staff knew all students had something to eat. Those who couldn't afford the tickets were quietly taken care of on the side.<sup>27</sup>

In the late 1960's the age of the Erskine School started to catch up with it. Pieces of sandstone decor began to fall from the bell tower above the main entrance. The bell and tower were removed, leaving a square column as it is today. "When I [Marshall Williams] attended there, that bell rang to tell students it was time to be in the building. A smaller bell rang to signify a tardy. The main bell was pulled by the custodian and the tardy bell was a wire and was pulled by a lucky student chosen by a teacher to do the honors."<sup>28</sup>

Also, before remodeling in the 70's, there was only one fire escape from the top floor located on the west end of the building. At that time during fire drills, students in the west upper floor went down that escape and the east middle and east end went down the stairs and out the first floor doors. Now there are three fire escapes from the upper floor.<sup>29</sup>

The 5-member Sturgis Independent School Board was reorganized in 1969 forming the 9-member Meade 46-1 School District. "A law passed by the state government made the organization of small districts into larger districts mandatory by July 1, 1969."<sup>30</sup>

With the district reorganization, supervision included 40 rural schools plus seven schools in Sturgis, one in Whitewood and one in Piedmont.<sup>31</sup>

After 10 years of negotiations, the school board accepted the city council's proposal for a new elementary school site just south of the fairgrounds. The building eventually built on that site was named Bear Butte Elementary. It housed K-4 from 1986 to 1999 and first graders exclusively from 1999 to December 2008.<sup>32</sup> By 2009, the Erskine building consisted of an administrative office, a gymnasium, classrooms for grades 3 and 4, a speech therapy room, a resource room, a music room, a computer lab, and a counselor's office."<sup>33</sup>

On November 12, 2001, "Erskine School, believed to be the oldest continuously operating school in South Dakota, marked its 100th anniversary. Teachers and past and present students held a good old-fashioned birthday party for the school."<sup>34</sup> The celebration was attended by Bayard Erskine, son of Rev. Carroll and Madge Erskine. Bayard had his mother's teaching contract dated July 11, 1905, signed by JJDavenport, board president. The contract amount was \$60 per month.<sup>35</sup>

Enrollment in the Meade School District has increased from 20 pupils in 1879 to 2,519 in 2008-2009. During WW2 there was a decrease in enrollment due to the shutdown of Ft. Meade.<sup>36</sup>

In March of 2003, a committee was established to explore the option of renovating the Erskine School building or building an addition to the Bear Butte Elementary site to bring all students in grades kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> into one location. The Thurston Design Group met with the committee over a 2-year period to complete a feasibility study. It was decided that the cost of renovating the Erskine School was too high, and that an addition to the Bear Butte School would be more advantageous for the students. On

October 3, 2006 and April 10, 2007, a bond issue proposal to build the addition as well as a new school at Union Center and Piedmont was put on the ballot. Voters rejected a 6.8 million dollar bond issue proposal for building projects, so the construction at Piedmont and Union Center were delayed. The board voted to begin Phase I of the project.<sup>37</sup> Phase I of the board's facility development proposal involves closing the Erksine, Primary, and Francis Case schools and expanding Bear Butte Elementary to include K-5. The proposed budget is \$9.8 million.<sup>38</sup> The decision was made partially due to the fact that "the school is heated with steam heat produced by a boiler installed in the 1920s."<sup>39</sup> Having taught in the building from 2002 – 2008, I experienced firsthand the often uncontrollable excessive heat or no heat at all depending on how the ancient boiler "felt" that day. Meade County Commissioners offered the district \$400,000 for the Erskine building. They plan to renovate the building into county offices.

There has been much discussion as to the future of the Erskine building due to its historical value. Carolyn Torma of the Historical Preservation Center met with the school board to explain that the honorary listing on the register would make the Erskine building eligible for some matching grants for exterior work. The center is mostly interested in the exterior of the building and would not restrict the usage for which the building was used.<sup>40</sup>

The main block of the building is a 2-story rectangle 22,812 feet square made of local sandstone. The official description says, "Among the Richardsonian Romanesque features of the structure are the center tower and round arched entranceway. The tower is crenulated and has a wooden balustrade. The double-hung windows of the first story also exhibit Romanesque semi-circular arches."<sup>41</sup>

The Erskine School has been put on the National Historic register. Bayard C. Erskine, son of Rev. Carroll D. Erskine for whom the school was named, shared his appreciation for the status. He and his brother Harlan attended Erskine all 12 years and graduated in 1931 and 1926 respectively.<sup>42</sup>

Marshall Williams is the son of Richard B. Williams a faculty member and principal in the school district from 1935 until 1968. The current Sturgis Middle School is named in his RB Williams' honor. Marshall was also a teacher in the Meade District for 38 years. He has collected information about the history of the schools in Sturgis. "The staff when my brother, sister, and I attended Erskine was considered very competent, very firm but fair. The principal kept a rubber hose in his lower right-hand desk drawer. I'm sure it was mainly displayed for effect, but I heard that it was used on some rare occasions. It was black, by the way!"<sup>43</sup>

"A school building could be compared to a play in that the building is the set and the action is provided by the students and the teachers. Erskine certainly provided a great setting for a lot of education and action. I drive by and think that the old building must feel lonely after all those years providing a place for the education of a constant flow of children of all description. And now the halls are silent."<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

1. "With a rope North Star young boy's help, Jeremiah Wilcox created the city of Sturgis" (The Sturgis Advertiser, May 8, 1889)
2. With a rope.
3. Census growth continues (Unknown Local Publication found in Sturgis Public Library Vertical File).
4. Krause, Randolph P. A History of the Sturgis Independent School District Number Twelve, Sturgis, South Dakota (Master's thesis, Black Hills Teachers' College, 1949.) Page 13.
5. Krause, 15.
6. Krause, 19.
7. Educational Era Ends With Dissolution of 90-Year Old Sturgis Independent School District No. 12 (Unknown Sturgis Publication found in Sturgis Public Library Vertical File July 10, 1963).
8. "Classes Start Monday at New Grade School" (Black Hills Press January 19, 1963).
9. Krause, History, 30.
10. "Proper School House" Needed by 1880 (Unknown Local Newspaper found in the Sturgis Public Library Vertical File May 1, 1978).
11. Thompson, George. "Behind these walls..." (Black Hills Press, November 14, 2001).
12. Thompson, "Behind these walls."
13. Notice to parents (Sturgis Weekly Record, March 19, 1886).
14. "Proper School House."
15. "Proper School House."
16. "Proper School House."
17. Thompson, "Behind these walls."
18. Thompson, "Behind these walls."

19. Erskine, Bayard C. Eager Young Minister Accepted Challenge (Unknown Publication found in the Sturgis Public Library Vertical File, May 1, 1978).
20. Erskine, Eager.
21. Williams, Marshall (E-mail interview by author, June 12, 2009).
22. "Proper School House."
23. "Proper School House."
24. "Classes Start Monday."
25. Williams interview.
26. Krause, History, 56.
27. Williams interview.
28. Williams interview.
29. Williams interview.
30. Aker, Alan. Still Going Strong! (Bear Butte Breezes, October 26, 1978).
31. Educational Era Ends With Dissolution of 90-Year Old Sturgis Independent School District No. 12 (Unknown Sturgis Publication found in Sturgis Public Library Vertical file, July 10, 1963).
32. Raymond, Marjorie. School Site Agreement Finally Made (Black Hills Press), March 25, 1985.
33. Meade 46-1. History of the Erskine Building Meade School District [http://www.meade.k12.sd.us/Elementary/history\\_erskine.htm](http://www.meade.k12.sd.us/Elementary/history_erskine.htm) (accessed February 28, 2009).
34. Thompson, "Behind these walls."
35. "Erskine Reminisces About Family Interest in School" (Meade County Times-Tribune, November 21, 1984).
36. "Proper School House."
37. Cook, Andrea J. "Sturgis Board OKs \$11.1M School Project" (Rapid City Journal, May-June 10, 2007).

38. "Meade 46-1 School District Schedules Public Meeting" (Meade County Times-Tribune, March 22, 2006).

39. Cook.

40. "Erskine May Be Listed in National Historic Register" (Unknown Publication found in the Sturgis Public Library Vertical file, January 1, 1960).

41. National Historic Register.

42. "Erskine Reminisces About Family Interest in School" (Meade County Times-Tribune, November 21, 1984).

43. Williams interview.

44. Williams interview.

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[http://www.meade.k12.sd.us/Elementary/history\\_erskine.htm](http://www.meade.k12.sd.us/Elementary/history_erskine.htm) (accessed February 28, 2009).
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- . "'Proper School House' Needed by 1880." Unknown Local Newspaper (Sturgis), May 1, 1978, Local edition.

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Williams, Marshall. E-mail interview by author, June 12, 2009.

Past Superintendents of the Meade School District

1900 – 1903	John Davis
1903 --1904	J. C. Roberts
1904 –1905	Henry R. Tucker
1905—1909	T. B. Hanna
1909—1917	W. H. Wagner
1917—1919	L. J. Belt
1919—1921	D. D. Evans
1921—1927	J. E. Colborn
1927—1930	J. F. Crouch
1930—1965	E. E. Grunwald
1965—1977	Dr. Kenneth Hauge
1970—1971	R. B. Williams served as acting Superintendent
1977—1985	Dr. Arnold Wold
1985 – 2001	Dr. Barry Furze
2001 -- Present	James Heinert

Past Principals at the Erskine School Building

1886 – 1888	H. H. Lorrimer
1888 – 1895	B. A. Tyler
1895 – 1900	C. W. Young
1900 – 1909	Superintendent served as Principal
1909 – 1911	Elsie Ely
1911 – 1913	Henry Nielsen
1913 – 1917	Charlotte Bushnell
1917 – 1920	D. D. Evans
1920 – 1921	Flora Wenke
1921 – 1924	S. M. Nieveen
1924 – 1930	E. E. Grunwald
1930 – 1937	William Brown
Jan. 1937 – 1967	R. B. Williams (K – 8 Principal)
1967 – 1973	Ivan Peterson
1973 – 1984	Donna Chapman
1984 -- 1988	Dorothy Boice
1988 – 1998	(Wilbur) Ed Stader
1998-- Present	Norman Graham