

School days, school days

WRIGHT CITY HIGH SCHOOL'S CLASS OF 1931 REMEMBERS

By Brad Urban
Staff writer

When members of Wright City High School's Class of 1931 went outside to play basketball, they dribbled on dirt courts. When they took their game inside, playing conditions improved but the gym — heated by an old stove — was bone chilling.

The classroom environment wasn't much better. Throughout the school day, students remained in one classroom and teachers moved from classroom to classroom. Every now and again, as the students attempted to do their lessons, a cloud of smoke appeared courtesy of the school's backed-up furnace.

School cafeterias were not an option at lunchtime. If students wanted something to eat, they went home, went to a restaurant or went to the local butcher shop during lunch hour.

Those were the days.

"If they (students) had to go to school today in the conditions we did, they would sue!" Nellie Ruge said last week. Ruge was a member of the Class of 1931, Wright City High School's first four-year graduating class.

Nellie's classmate, Waldo Krueger, carried the sentiment even further.

"If convicts were housed in a place like that now, it would be cruel and unusual punishment," Krueger joked.

Things were certainly different for the class of 1931. But while they didn't have many of the amenities that today's students enjoy, their class blazed a trail for others to follow.

The Class of 1931's 19 members were the first to graduate from the school after completing four years of high school. Prior to that year, students attended high school for two years, then some continued their education at Central Wesleyan College in Warrenton, Ruge said.

Ruth Albright was one of those who continued her education at Central Wesleyan. She attended Wright City for two years then moved to Warrenton the next year to study at Central Wesleyan. When Wright City became a four-year high school, Albright returned and graduated with the class of 1931.

Central Wesleyan had more teachers than Wright City and offered additional courses, including Latin. Albright enjoyed attending Central Wesleyan, but it was much more expensive for her to rent a room in Warrenton than to stay on her parents' farm in Wright City.

Until they finished their sophomore year, the students at Wright City High had no idea they would be staying on for two

more years. The news was even welcomed by some.

"We just accepted it," Ruge said. "If we didn't, we would just have to go somewhere else."

"It was just the thing to do I think,"

Krueger said.

Students in 1931 took many of the same classes that high school students take today. During their first year, students studied algebra, history, English and mathematics. After the first two years, the school offered some elective classes.

Wright City didn't have many elective classes, but the ones they did have — typing, business or trigonometry — proved useful.

Ruge took up typing, and it was a skill

she used throughout her

life. Typing was different then, and perhaps more difficult, than it is today, she said. The students practiced on cumbersome manual typewriters. Pressing the heavy keys on those machines was sure to give the typist a good finger workout, she said.

Instead of grades from A through F, Ruge's class brought home report cards with an E for excellent, S for satisfactory, M for medium, I for inferior and F for flunking. Both Krueger and Ruge said they were good students. Krueger preferred mathematics, while Ruge's favorite subjects were English and history. She lost the battle for class valedictorian by less than a point.

Ruge remembered competing in a school spelling bee and was doing well until the moderator gave her the word "bayou." Thinking it would be spelled like

it sounded, Nellie spelled it incorrectly with an 'i' and an 'o.' She said she hasn't misspelled the word since.

"I was an achiever," she said. "I had to have it right."

In addition to poorly heated and sometimes smoky classrooms, the school was deficient in another regard — there were no bathrooms. Students had no choice but to use an outhouse near the school's softball diamond, Krueger said.

The location of the outhouse put it in a precarious position. When a softball game was underway, infielders had to be precise with their throws to first base. A ball



Susan Heiman

Ruth Albright, a member of the Wright City High School Class of 1931.

that overshot the first basemen would almost surely find itself underneath the outhouse and in ... well, you get the picture.

Aside from fears of firing a softball "into the soup" as some would call it, sports were no less competitive than today, though some of them would look unfamiliar to today's sports fan.

Take basketball. Nellie played jumping center on the school's six-person basketball team. As jumping center, Nellie handled the jump ball duties at the beginning of the game and after each basket. After tapping the ball, she roamed the middle third of the court and tried to advance the ball to the team's two forwards who took it in for the basket.

Like today, girl's basketball back then could get physical. During one game, while playing a school from suburban St. Louis, Ruge's counterpart kept pushing her around. When Ruge found an opportune time, she shoved the girl to the ground.

"And boy, I took her down and — I'm sorry — but she sprained her wrist and I wasn't too sorry about it," Ruge recalled.

The school's arch rival in those days was Warrenton. Even though the Wright City squads would compete vigorously, they didn't have much success against the Warrenton teams.

"I think they flunked their kids so they

would be big and tall by the time they were seniors," Krueger said.

Sports weren't the only activities for students. Albright participated in an operetta during one of her years at Wright City High. Albright, who had the leading role, doesn't recall the name of the operetta, but she and the rest of the cast had a good time.

"It was one of those far-fetched things where the hero had the title," she said. "They had some pretty songs in it if I remember correctly."

While the Class of 1931 enjoyed their school days, times were tough for the community as it struggled through the early years of the Great Depression.

"I guess I didn't realize how hard times were because people didn't talk about it," Krueger said.

Ruge and Krueger don't recall many families who had a lot of money in those days. Many students had their mothers make their clothes, but hard times weren't exclusive to schoolchildren and their families. The school superintendent had to deliver milk in Wright City to supplement his income.

"We were poor," Ruge said. "If we had a warm coat, it was a blessing."

But even with the Great Depression as a backdrop, the Class of 1931 produced some happy memories along the way.

"Looking back, it was a happy time. I didn't realize how much fun I was having," Krueger said.

