



The History of Education in the Culleoka Area

Probably the first school in this area was built in 1820 near the old Wilkes Cemetery about one mile west of Culleoka. The building, which has been gone for many years, housed a school for girls in one side and a place for religious worship in the other.

In 1835, the Pleasant Grove Male Academy was organized. It was built about a mile west of the village on a two acre lot sold to the trustees of the school for \$20.00 by M. H. Booker.

The Pleasant Grove Female Academy was organized several years later before the outbreak of the Civil War. At a time when the education of women was considerably less important than the education of men, it is interesting to note that this progressive community was operating an academy with an enrollment of approximately one hundred girls.

In 1867, the Rev. A. G. Dinwiddle organized a school in the basement of the present Methodist Church on Quality Street below the present school campus. This school, known as Culleoka Institute, was later to become the birthplace of the famous Webb Brother's Academy for boys.

Their enrollment grew so quickly that the church basement was too small for them, and a new location was necessary.

The school was built on land located today directly across from the gym parking lot and Sam Hubbell's home.

The school taught not only local boys, but often had as many as 90 to 130 boarding students. They came from many different states and several foreign countries to prepare for college.

In 1884, the school absorbed the Pleasant Grove Academy and became known as the Culleoka Academy.

Sawney Webb's greatest problem in Culleoka was "demon rum". Some saloon owners persisted in selling it to students. His attorney helped him reword the school charter to invoke a law in the village that "no liquor sales were to be made within four miles of a Chartered school outside an incorporated town." Culleoka was not incorporated then.

During his last year at Culleoka, the town voted on the issue of incorporation. Male citizens who wanted to buy their liquor locally and legally gave incorporation an over-whelming victory because an incorporated town could have saloons regardless of the location of "chartered" schools.

By the fall of 1885, Webb had begun negotiations with the citizens of Bell Buckle to locate his school there.

The first Culleoka knew about the move was when they saw "two mule teams, loaded with boys and baggage, disappearing into the distance..."

Laurence McMillin, in his biography, *The Schoolmaker: Sawney Webb and the Bell Buckle Story*, describes the exodus from Culleoka vividly.

..."In this all-day cross-county jaunt of some forty-odd miles, the students went through their usual study and recitation periods while bumping along, sitting on loose planks across open farm wagons. Of course, each boy had been warned to pack for an early start the next day and threatened to keep quiet about it."

A Bell Buckle graduate claims this episode never happened, but the people of Culleoka retold the story often and believed it to be true.

In the years immediately following the close of the academy, several different teachers conducted classes in the community including Moore Institute (1896), the Harris and Graham School, and C. S. Williamson's school. Finally in 1900, when the old Webb building burned, a new public school was built, and the county assumed the responsibility for education in Culleoka.



The people of Culleoka had long dreamed of having "a modern school building to house a progressive school", and as early as 1916 began negotiating with the county for a school here. Then World War I broke out, and priorities changed. Culleokans became involved in patriotic ventures.

In 1919, Georgia senator, Bill Upshaw delivered a series of lectures in Culleoka. Encouraged by the lectures to continue their quest for a new building, the citizens of the community pledged several thousand dollars to help finance construction. In the spring when school was closed, a potluck dinner was held to celebrate the destruction of the old, three room frame building which had been built with scrap lumber from the Tennessee Centennial.

Construction began on the new building in the spring of 1920, and when the school year began in September, 1921, the building was not ready to occupy. School opened in the Methodist Church. Miss Mary Virginia Graham, who graduated in the class of 1925, remembered having a physical education class in the aisle of the church.

In December, students were given an extra week of Christmas vacation while the faculty moved into the new building. The community watched the proceedings with the knowledge

that they had raised \$10,000 of the \$25,000 cost of the building by selling eggs, chickens, and other farm products and by producing plays.

There was no gymnasium and no cafeteria. Many students rode to school on horseback and tied their ponies under the shade of a big tree at the site of the present elementary building. Other students were transported in bumpy school "trucks" and brought their lunches in paper sacks. The students used part of their lunch period to feed and water their horses and ponies.

Construction began on the gym in 1929. The ARROW reports, "Work will begin immediately on the floors, and soon windows and doors will be added. 'It can't be long now' until we will be practicing basketball in the new gymnasium". Some records show that this gym was built entirely with funds raised by the Culleoka community.

Culleoka had an undefeated football season in 1925 topping such teams as Pulaski, Lynnville, and Centerville.

The home games were played on Graham field, and fans who came to watch either sat on the ground or car fenders because there were no bleachers.

The late Harris Cheatman, long-time postman in Culleoka, recalled that the coach, Mr. Percy Priest, had never played football and knew very little about the game. He bought a mail order book on football and used plays from it.

The 1926 "Flashlight" records another undefeated season in 1926. The team trained every day, rain or shine. In seven games, their goal line was crossed only once by Cedar Hill. Culleoka scored 154 points that year and allowed their opponents only six.

Basketball was also a popular sport and the only sport in which girls were allowed to participate. In 1925, the girls team placed second in the county tournament, galling to Haylong (now Mt. Pleasant) 10 to 16 in the finals. They brought home ten dollars in gold as their prize.



The mothers of the community often cooked lunch for the students and faculty and brought it to school each day. Because there was no cafeteria, lunches were usually eaten outside. Eventually a small cafeteria was built adjacent to the school, and this building later became a science laboratory.

For the first three years, there were only ten grades and Culleoka and anyone who wanted to graduate had to commute to Central in Columbia by train. Students were responsible for paying their own fares and sometimes students who could not afford them had to drop out of school.

The train left the Culleoka depot about 7:00 every morning. Pupils would walk from the train depot in Columbia to Central which was located on West 8th street. After school, they caught the train again and rode to the Pleasant Grove depot across from the old Culleoka Produce Company. They usually did not get back to Culleoka until 5:00.

Maury County required only eight months of school at that time, but the community "wanted to be better", Mary Graham recalled, and they made up enough money to supplement teacher's salaries and added a ninth month to the school year.

The school had no running water and students had to pump it from a well in the field south of the school property and carry the heavy pails back to school. When the county dug for water on campus, they found that the sulfur was too harsh for drinking.

Chapel services were held every morning. Ministers from the community came and spoke on a special subject each week.

At examination time, every paper submitted to the teacher had a pledge at the bottom, signed by the student, stating that the student had not cheated or helped another pupil.

Strict rules of conduct were set for boys and girls. There was a set of stairs exclusively for boys to use and another set for the girls. They also had separate doors to use entering and leaving the building. May Graham relates an incident when a boy was caught passing a note to one of the girls, and the principal, Mr. Galloway, read it aloud in chapel to the entire student body.

The course of study included a one year teacher training course which gave students a certificate to teach for one year after graduation.

By 1924, Culleoka had added grades eleven and twelve, and the first class, consisting of 6 boys, was graduated. the graduates included the late W. A. Richardson, Sr., Maury County's representative in the Tennessee General Assembly for many years, and Billy Calvert, who is the last surviving member of the class.

Through the years, Culleoka school has graduated over 800 boys and girls. Classes have always been small, but spirit and enthusiasm have been the hallmark of this rural establishment.

In the late 1940's with the country at war with Germany and Japan, many of our young men were drafted even before they completed their senior year. Ed Denton, a member of the class of 1944, remembers being called up before his graduation. At the end of the war, Vanderbilt University offered short term classes to allow these young men an opportunity to complete their education and earn a high school diploma.

Culleoka continued to grow and prosper under the leadership of Principal Hughes Brooks who served the school from 1946 until his retirement in 1973. Under his leadership, the community saw the enrollment of the school double in size. In the early sixties, the

enrollment was under 200 students. Four teachers, Miss Eddie Hayes, Mrs. John Ashe, Mrs. Sadie Hobbs, and Mrs. W. M. Allen taught all the elementary grades. Brooks saw the enrollment climb to over 400 students and the faculty and staff to plus 20. During his tenure, a new elementary building was constructed, the cafeteria enlarged and the auditorium remodeled to house a larger library.

At the beginning of the 1973 school year, Harry Underwood became the new principal and served Culleoka until his retirement in 1996.

In 1975, Culleoka occupied a new high school building and the two-story structure that had educated the children of the community since 1921 was razed. When the cornerstone was removed, Mary Graham, who as a child was present to place the contents in the vault, was also present to help remove them.

During the next twenty years with the coming of Saturn to Maury County and the build up of subdivisions in the southern part of the county, Culleoka's current enrollment has grown to over 1000 students with a faculty and staff in excess of 75 people.

In the early 1990's an eight room middle school building was completed on the 12 acre campus and later a 12 room elementary wing was completed in 1997.

In 1997, Mary Ruth Campbell was appointed principal of the unit school and Penny Waters and Kenneth Harris were named assistant principals. When Campbell was selected Instructor of Secondary Education for the county in May 1998, Dan Long, assistant principal at Central was named to the Culleoka position. Waters returned to the classroom in August 1999 and Mary Kennedy Brown took over the position of assistant principal. Long left the school early in the 1999 school year and Jeff Quirk took over the position of principal at Culleoka.

The school underwent major renovations in 2005-2006 with the construction of a new office area, a new cafeteria (the library will be expanded into the existing cafeteria), an auditorium, a practice gym, and several new classrooms, including two science labs, an agriculture shop, and art and music rooms.

Special thanks to Ms. Jane McNaron (teacher at Culleoka Unit School) for compiling this information.