

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Watson School

by Adrianus Boudewyn - 2007

It was a time when the gold rush had somewhat subsided. Covered wagon caravans, filled with farmers and their families, started arriving in growing numbers. They were attracted by the fertile soil and they were a very desirable class of emigrant, fully intent on working the land and making permanent homes here. And providing a school for their growing children at their own expense, if necessary. And that was the key. Struggling state and county governments were new in their creation and without funds.

At 150 years old, between Bodega and Freestone is an important monument to that past. It was one of some 100 one-room schoolhouses built in every hamlet between 1850 and 1930. What distinguishes is that it is still in its original condition and still on the same site.



Architecturally, the one-room schoolhouse in the West tells the tale of each community it was a 'member' of. The story of the town, city or region can be extracted from the way the builders, usually local settlers, placed the windows, set up the anteroom or built the entry doors.

The school was built from redwood trees harvested along and milled locally. The front of the schoolhouse has a functioning bell tower. The school also has the unique feature of a sloping floor from the rear of the building to the front, forming an amphitheater-shaped seating arrangement for the desks. It is said students liked to roll marbles down the floor for fun. Oil lamps were used for lighting until electric lights were installed in the early 1900s. A wood stove served as heating for the life of the school until it was closed and donated to the county in 1967. Today it is 's landmark #23 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The school is named after James Watson who donated the site. The community of farmers and dairymen donated their skills, time and materials. The community as a whole built the school.

During the 111 years as a school, enrollment varied. When the school opened in 1856 there were 11 students. During the 1920s there were as many as 35. When the school closed in 1967 there were eight students and a graduating class of two - (Mann) Hendren and Dan Furlong. One teacher taught multiple grades. The teacher would lecture one grade level while others were reading or completing assignments. Older students would help the younger students, creating a family type atmosphere.

The school had many talented teachers during its existence, one of the most memorable being Margaret Witham. She taught at Watson school from 1902 until her retirement in 1950. Living one mile east of the school, Margaret walked to school every day until her later years. She taught approximately 350 students during her career. As testament to her talent, one student at her retirement described her as follows, "She is gifted with a practical mind, a fine sense of humor and a strong sense of her responsibilities. Her quiet impact on the minds and hearts of her pupils has shown unusually lasting and gratifying effects."

WATSON SCHOOL

Last teacher at the school the school from 1955 through 1967 was Alice Enzminger who said "It was more like a family than a school. I had no discipline problems; these children came from homes where they knew how to work and be obedient. They were never out of order. "When interviewing students who went to the school they describe an atmosphere of learning very much like the pioneer families intended - close, careful nurturing of students to equip them for the rigors of life (in later years, higher learning and careers).

Well, 150 years can take a toll on a building and in the case of the Watson School, there are foundation problems and seismic safety issues that need to be resolved before the reopening of the facility for public use. Regional Parks is in the process of restarting a fund drive to complete necessary restoration over a multi-year. A brochure with historical information on the project has been created as a public outreach and fund-raising tool.

From the Sonoma County Website: "Watson School is located on Bodega Highway between Sebastopol and the Town of Bodega, one mile west of Valley Ford-Freestone Road. The parcel is approximately three quarters of an acre in size. The original land was donated in 1856 by James Watson for the construction of a school to serve the communities of Bodega, Freestone and Valley Ford. James Watson also organized local pioneering families to help with the construction of the one-room, Greek-revival wooden schoolhouse. The school was built from redwood trees harvested along Joy Road and milled locally. The front of the schoolhouse has a functioning bell tower and bell. The school also has a unique sloping floor from the rear of the building to the front, which forms an amphitheater-shaped seating arrangement. A wood stove was installed as the only heating source for the building.

Watson School has the distinction of being the only one-room schoolhouse in public ownership within Sonoma County remaining on the original site, and is believed to be the longest operating one-room school, for more than 111 years (1856-1967), in California's public school history. A 1960-61 County School report indicated that the building had never been enlarged, remodeled, or altered, other than the addition of electrical wiring, modern plumbing and a new roof."

