

Old Schools Never Die, Not In Our Memories

■ Willamina High is too expensive to repair in these hard knocks days.

By Ron Karten

With every old building, a few ghosts seem to come along at no extra charge.

Willamina High School is one of those great, old buildings that went up as part of a public works program established to create jobs at the tail end of the Depression. *Born of Depression and died of Recession*, might be its epitaph, but that wouldn't tell the whole story.

It wouldn't mention the bowling alley—likely apocryphal—that was supposed to be found under the school's classrooms. "I don't know about the bowling alley," said Robert Page, 25 years an English and History teacher at Willamina High, "but I can remember going down there and retrieving kids."

"There is no bowling alley," said Charlene Brown, who used to be deputy clerk for the district and now runs the Willamina Museum. "All it is is a piping system that runs from the Ag Shop through the lower part of the building. I remember when I was in school (Class of '59), kids would go down in the Ag Shop and pop up in the classrooms. And of course disrupt the classes."

Brown, like others of an earlier generation, had not heard about the bowling alley until the question was asked, but Brown added, "I asked my grandson (Brandon Flynn, Jr. — Class of '04) about it and he said, 'Oh yeah, everybody knows about the bowling alley.'"

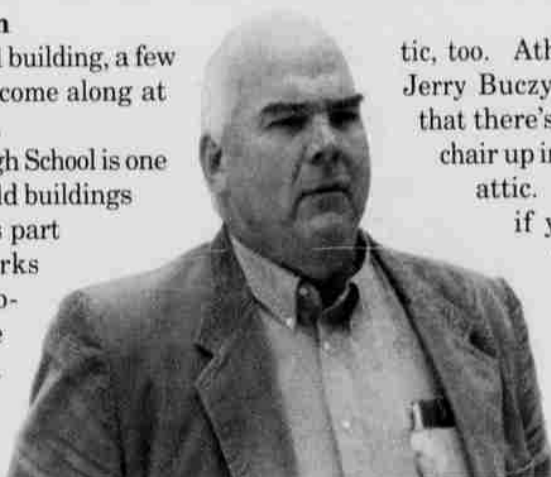
"I heard about it," said Sam Ksionsk (ka-shonk), Maintenance Supervisor, "but I don't think there is one. I remember high school kids used to jump in the tunnel in the Ag Shop entryway and try to get to the girl's locker room."

A fairly obvious question comes up. "It's possible to get to the outside of the girl's locker room," he responded, "but you could never get in from (there). It's about a one-foot concrete wall."

That basement, however, remains a source of stories and unfortunately, sometimes a good bit more.

It is also the location of an expensive asbestos problem, according to District Administrative Secretary Deb Eisele, which is one of the reasons it was time to close this baby down.

If the bottom of the school is replete with stories, there are some in the at-



Moving Man — Willamina High School Principal Gus Forster is a man on the move after the announcement that old high school would be closing and moving up the hill to the middle school. Forster spent time collecting boxes for weeks prior to the move.

tic, too. Athletic Director Jerry Buczynski reported that there's an old lounge chair up in the building's attic. "The rumor is if you can't find the maintenance man, he's probably up there," he said.

"Actually, that was Charles Heckadon, the guy I replaced," said Ksionsk. "When I

went up there my first year here to change the light bulbs, there was a chair there and it was underneath a 150-watt light bulb and there was a paperback book by the chair. I figured he was getting some peace and quiet up there."

But for an unnamed student who has long since graduated, grown and even

sion of musical chairs. The high school is moving to the middle school, the middle school to the elementary school in Grand Ronde, and the elementary school children in Grand Ronde will move in with the Willamina Grade School kids in Willamina. The effort will save the district over \$500,000, said District Superintendent and High School Principal Gus Forster.

"I don't have a long history (with the building)," said Forster, "but I love old buildings. I think every ball field in the country should be Wrigley Field. It's kind of exciting to move to a newer facility up on the hill, but I like the character of the old building."

A number of parts of the old high school will continue to serve, and the way the new configuration plays out, programs like theater arts could benefit.

"Luckily, we are keeping the auditorium," said Page. "There is a silver lining here someplace. We are now going to be allowed to have an auditorium for the high school students." Previously, a number of programs shared the high school auditorium making play rehearsals difficult and



Last Day — Students emptied out their lockers and some helped empty classrooms at Willamina Union High School during the last day of school. Due to budget woes, the school will be closed for classes, but remain open for school activities for now.

retired, the attic was anything but peaceful. "I know one time, one of the kids was up there," said Mitchell, "and got over where the library was, which is now the biology room. He stepped off the boards and fell through the ceiling."

Ghosts, stories, history — they don't pay the bills, and the costs to keep this building in service are too high in these hard knock times for schools.

"It's so ironic," said Page. "We did fund-raisers and shipped books and teaching supplies to Zimbabwe and other areas of the world, and now, due to finances, we're forced out of our building."

"Everybody has a period of growth and decline, and now we're experiencing that decline," he said.

In Willamina, that decline is translating into a kind of educational ver-

sometimes impossible to schedule.

"We're going to keep a program going that was in threats of being eliminated," said Page.

Which brings us to the time the theater program bought a fog maker for one of the plays. "It worked better than we expected," said Page. "A student opened a window. It sent the fog into the auditorium. The wrestlers (who were practicing there) opened the auditorium doors. The fog went out and up the hall and into the library. The vice principal came running down thinking there was a fire."

In all, five high school classrooms will close for all uses, said Forster. A little less than half of the high school continues to be usable.

Alternative education, the city library and the recreation center people all have their eyes on using parts of

the high school facilities in the coming year, according to Eisele.

"From the kids, I've seen a lot of mixed emotions," he said. "Some of the kids, seniors, graduating, they got kind of nostalgic. They said, 'We're the last class that will graduate from here.'"

While the district has reserved enough rooms and teachers for every student and subject, the challenge now is to help students make their new buildings "their own," in the words of Math Teacher Julie Peters.

"They're already transferring the trophies and photos and each teacher has their own idea on their own room," she said. "I've got projects that my kids did this year that I'm just going to transfer, so they have the same ownership. We're fixing up the courtyard and picking up tables to make it ours. Even though we don't know how long we're going to be there."

"What we're doing right now," said Forster after the close of school, "a lot of the kids are coming up with great ideas. The Key Club kids want to come in and paint with the school colors. We're going to support those kind of efforts so that they can take some ownership in it."

"I'm personally having a hard time looking at it as the last day," said Athletic Director Jerry Buczynski on the last day, "because we'll still have football, baseball and softball down here until we can get facilities up there up to standards."

Which brings us to the story of the outside bleachers, originally built and later rebuilt by volunteers from the community. They burned down twice and were once crushed by snow, according to Charlene Brown.

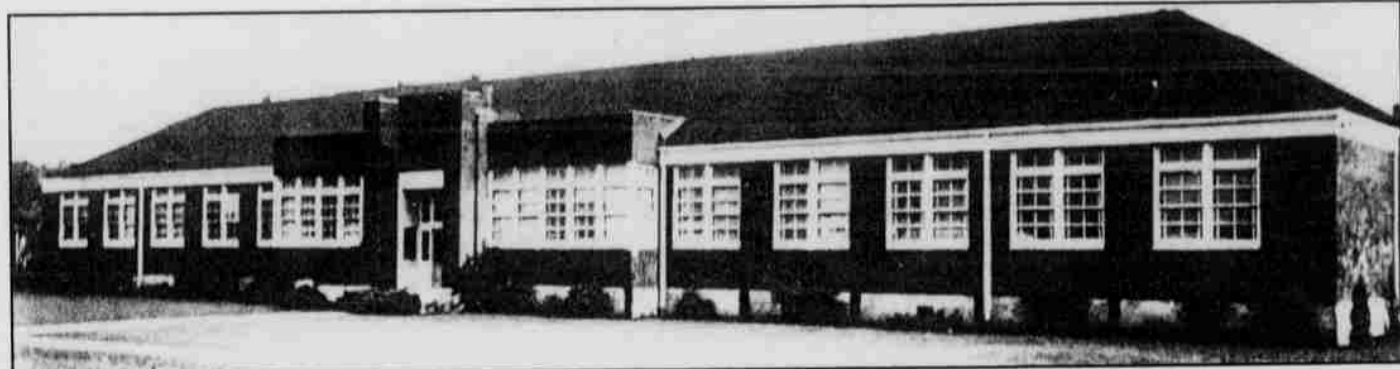
"In 1939," the Museum's history says, "a Union High School district was formed by joining about 16 grade school districts." A Works Progress Administration grant paid 45-percent of the cost of the new building, originally estimated at \$90,900. It was occupied for the first time in 1940 with an enrollment of 116. It closes this year with an enrollment of 283.

In Portland architect C.N. Freeman's original drawing, the structure over the front door soars high above the building, but that structure never survived past the drawing. School board member Carl Wise found a better use for the money. "He said, 'Let's cut that down and we'll put battleship linoleum in the hallways,'" said Lucille Mitchell. "And it's lasted."

In all her years of teaching, she was always glad to be on that battleship linoleum because it was put down over wood, instead of the concrete that formed the floors of the newer addition. "When you stand on wood all day it is certainly easier than standing on concrete," she said.

All these years later, superintendent and principal Gus Forster found himself with the glamorous job of collecting boxes to move the contents of three schools. One day, he went all the way to Salem in his search.

How many boxes did it take to make the move? "For all three schools?" said Forster. "I don't know. I'll have to work that number up for you." He gave it some thought. "Fifteen more than a passel," he said.



Back In The Day — Tribal members have been going to Willamina High School since it opened its doors in 1940. Now, with school budgets lacking, the centerpiece of this small logging town in the West Valley will close its doors and most likely fade into the memories of those students who attended over the last 60 years. The school opened with 116 students, was enlarged in 1954 to handle 500 students and closed with a class of 283.

Photo courtesy of Willamina Museum

Photos by Peta Tinda