

School district overcrowding a familiar problem

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Hermiston School District begins school this week amid worries about having adequate space for students — a common refrain in decades of back-to-school stories in the Hermiston Herald.

The district is currently using 24 portable classrooms, with its facilities committee setting its sights on a new elementary school, an expansion of Hermiston High School and Sandstone Middle School and a renovation of Highland Hills Elementary.

When Highland Hills was built in 1980 the district was facing similar overcrowding problems, but on a smaller scale. A front page headline 35

years ago declared “Enrollment Record Shattered.” The picture accompanying it showed construction workers mingling with students after work on the new elementary school was not completely finished in time for school to start.

The story stated enrollment on the first day of school was 239 students more than the previous year, up to what was at the time a “record-breaking” 3,100 students (Hermiston School District ended the 2014-2015 school year with 5,243 students).

From the Sept. 3, 1980 article:

First day attendance produced overloads in the third and fifth grades at Sunset and in the first, fourth and sixth grades at Highland Hills.

This has created a lopsided situation in the dis-



trict, with the two elementary schools east of Highway 395 — Sunset and Highland Hills — handling about 175 more students than the two elementary schools west of the highway — West Park and Rocky Heights.

... The district's prob-

lems weren't helped any when only about half of the classrooms at Highland Hills were ready for occupancy Tuesday.

The district had hoped that all 18 classrooms at the new, \$2.5 million school would have been ready for

the start of school. But late last week school officials were informed that only 10 of the rooms would be ready on time. Part of the blame was put on a contractor who was pulled off the job and a delay in the shipment of ceiling tiles.

To accommodate the overflow of students, the district devised a last-minute plan that called for the busing of two classrooms of second graders and two classrooms of third graders to Sunset; the busing of two sixth grade classes to the junior high; and the busing of a fifth grade class to Rocky Heights.

Highland Hills Principal Harry Trump admitted things were pretty chaotic at the school Tuesday morning “but the people who were working there kept everything going.”

Harry, Assistant Super-

intendent Dale Gaylord and a custodian spent Saturday, Sunday and Monday moving supplies into the new school. Teachers also gave up their Labor Day holiday Monday to help with the task.

... The remaining rooms will “definitely” be ready by Sept. 12, he said.

Hermiston History is a regular feature in the Hermiston Herald. If you have something to share about the history of the greater Hermiston area, send your submission to editor@hermistonherald.com with “Hermiston History” in the subject line. If you have a question about the area’s history you would like the Herald staff to look into, you can send your questions to the same email address with “Hermiston History question” in the subject line.

HISTORY

He didn't mean to buy a house; it was an accident

GARY L. WEST
SHADES OF GRAY



different communities, 12 different apartments and one rental home. Based on that track record, I've moved, on average, every two years.

I accidentally bought a house.

Well, that's not quite the right description. It was more of an impulse purchase.

I was having difficulty finding an apartment to rent. My plan was to rent an apartment or duplex on my return to Hermiston. I've been a renter my entire adult life. I justified this by the transient nature of a career in journalism. In the 26 years of my working life I have lived in seven

I further justified this in my own mind by not wanting to deal with things like yard work, or painting, or other costs, inconveniences and expenses that come with home ownership.

Two and a half years ago, a dishwasher hose in the apartment above mine in Salem came unhooked, and water started flowing out of the light fixtures and smoke detector in my apartment. It created an unsightly and drippy bulge in the ceiling of my apartment. That gave me the excuse I

needed to move out a dreary apartment I had lived in for 8 years. I just packed up and left behind the building that was falling down around me.

I fully expected to rent again on moving back to Hermiston. I had been living in a two-bedroom apartment in Keizer, Oregon, which I was paying \$800 a month to rent. As I started checking out the rental ads locally, it looked like comparably sized apartments here could be found for about \$650 to \$750 a month, which seemed quite inexpensive, compared to what I was used to paying. It was also far less expensive than the last place I rented in Palm Springs, California, where I was paying just about \$1,000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment back in 2005.

My apartment hunt hit a snag. By the time I was able to reach the apartment man-

agers of the places I was interested in renting, the units were already off the market. I even filled out a rental application at a local company that manages units for multiple rental owners. I think they had about 2 or 3 units available when I turned my application. However, they wouldn't show me the unit until my application was approved. By the time that process was completed, all their units were rented.

I had been keeping a friend posted on my housing search and he had friends who had a rental home they were preparing to sell. So, he put us together.

I liked the house and the price.

A local mortgage company pre-approved me for financing, and the next thing I knew I was making an offer on a house. The homeowners were kind enough to allow me to rent the house during the financing and appraisal process, which gave me a place to

live and a place to move my stuff in time to start my job here July 1.

I had plenty of opportunities to back out because the financing and appraisal processes took seemingly forever. We had to extend the closing twice in order to get the deal done.

But last week, just as we were putting the Aug. 19 issue of the Herald to bed, I was also sneaking out to sign a mountain of papers. I officially became a homeowner on Aug. 18, or perhaps more accurately, I became a home mortgage holder.

I have only given serious thought to buying a home twice before. Once was when I lived in Palm Springs, but I was too deep in debt at the time and home prices were climbing too rapidly to make that feasible. The other time was about 25 years ago, the last time I was living in Hermiston and editor of the Hermiston Herald.

Life is teaching me

that sometimes you get second chances in life. It also teaches me a home isn't just about a structure where you can keep your stuff, but it's about a place where you put down roots. I thought I severed my roots here long ago and transplanted myself elsewhere, but those transplanted roots never took hold. Friends and family have shown me that the roots here were still alive and still nurturing me.

So, maybe buying my first home, at age 49, wasn't really an accident at all. The seeds for that eventuality were planted long ago by family and a friendship planted right here in our famously sandy soil.

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