

When Robert Ryan and his neighbors found local education inadequate, they opened their own classrooms

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

cause the school isn't in a wealthy, fashionable neighborhood. Most students come from what Bob describes as a "middle-middle class" district. Consequently, the \$700 annual tuition agreed on by the board imposed real hardship on most parents. Says Bob: "It's a credit to them that they were willing to make sacrifices to help their children get a good education."

Even so, each year the school found itself about \$5,000 in the red, which was covered by voluntary contributions. Bob won't say how much he himself contributed, but it reportedly was considerable.

Another major problem was finding a building. Since the school was to open with only 12 students, they didn't need a big place. Most of the first-semester tuition went into salaries, supplies, lawyer's fees, and other organizational expenditures.

After searching the neighborhood for weeks, Bob finally found a building, formerly a synagogue, which could be rented for less than \$50 a month. The board named it the Oakwood School, after a famous Quaker school in Sidney Harmon's home town, Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

The next problem was teachers. "Most private schools can't offer pension plans or any of the other benefits and securities provided by public schools, nor pay as much," Bob explained. "We could pay even less!" As a result, they got all the wrong people.

ANOTHER DRAWBACK was the emotionally and physically handicapped children brought to the school by parents seeking the kind of treatment their youngsters couldn't get in public schools. "We struggled along with them for three years," Bob recalls, "but it just couldn't work in with our plans to make it an exceptional school for exceptional children."

Eventually, each child had to undergo

extensive physical, aptitude, and psychological tests before he was accepted.

In spite of financial difficulties from the beginning, a scholarship fund was established to help gifted children whose parents couldn't afford any tuition payment.

During the first three years, as enrollment increased to 50 students, the synagogue building could no longer provide enough space. So parents offered whatever space they had in their own homes.

Ryan's "exercise shack," on the back of his property, became the first-grade room. "All in all," he remembers, "we were divided into five places. The city officials were never sure where we held our classes."

COPING WITH city, county, and state school boards took much of Bob's time once he found himself appointed the school's representative on civic matters. So did finding a new site when it was decided they had to build if they were to stay in business.

After an extensive real-estate hunt, Bob and Jessica found what they considered an ideal location at an unusually low price. Just why the three acres were so reasonable they found out only later: they had been condemned!

"During the storms of 1938, the whole area was flooded," Bob declared. "But investigation revealed that with all the control work that had been done since then, the flood danger no longer existed. All I had to do was to convince the authorities."

And all that took was a year! With the money he could have earned in the time he spent running back and forth to City Hall, he could have contributed a block on Wilshire Boulevard!

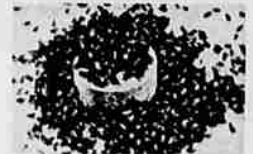
Nevertheless, by the time Bob went to New York on a personal-appearance tour shortly after the first new building was completed, the rapidly diminishing student

(Continued)

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