

2018 "extra special" year for school district established in 1868

by Joe Leicht

Officials of the Bayless School District couldn't have written a better script for capping a yearlong celebration of its sesquicentennial: An inaugural homecoming football parade and game with fun, food and faces from the past.

Superintendent Ronald Tucker said while academics will always be the 150-year-old district's main focus, this year's establishment of its first-ever high school varsity football team "is a pretty big deal. We are using this as the culminating activity of our 150th anniversary celebration."

Former Bayless prom queens will grace the homecoming parade, with as many as 30 of them possibly returning to their alma mater for the Oct. 13 bash.

I'm working hard on that right now. So far, 10 of the former queens have said they'll definitely come," said Sally Wear, Bayless Alumni Association director and arguably the face of the district.

She is a 1959 Bayless High School graduate and former elementary and high school secretary. In 2017, Wear received the Pioneer in Education Award from the Missouri School Board Association.



The original Bayless one-room schoolhouse, known as the "Old Rock House," began serving children in 1868. The building was said to have been built by soldiers who had recently returned home from the Civil War.



Bayless Elementary is a 2016 National School of Character. The school is located at 4531 Weber Road.



The Bayless School Drum Corps of 1923. The adults shown are Mr. Cleaver, drum corps director, and eighth grade teacher Violet Bascom.

District Public Relations Director Paula Napier assembled a comprehensive history of Bayless schools for the sesquicentennial. It can be viewed on the district website. Some of the landmarks are quirky testaments to a persistent community of education:

- Available records indicate the first Bayless school was built on one acre sold to the board of education by Cornelia Forman in 1868. It was built by soldiers who had returned from the Civil War and was called "the Old Rock School."
- The district is named after educator and businessman Samuel Bayles, a Michigan native who taught school in the St. Louis area during the late 1850s. Bayles' surname originally had two "s"s but one was dropped to distinguish his family branch from other relatives. A

limestone panel on the building that now serves as Bayless Junior High identifies it as "Bayles School." In 1910, the district reclaimed the lost "s" and Bayless became its official name.

- The bronco, or "broncho", was chosen as the school mascot in 1931. At some point in the 1950s, an "h" was inserted and "broncho" has remained the customary spelling.
- Up until 1930, the district had no high school and designated one student per year to attend secondary education at taxpayers' expense at Webster Groves High School.

The first Bayless High School, built in 1934 after passage of a construction referendum in 1933, is currently Bayless Junior High School, with the district's administrative offices in the basement.

"This is one of the more historic buildings in the Bayless area," said Assistant Superintendent Mike Hawkins. "It was built under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and is almost all concrete. It's very sturdily constructed. I've been told if there were ever to be an earthquake, this is one of the safest places to be."

Hawkins said, however, that the building has limitations when it comes to expansion.

"It was built for 250 high school kids and we have 434 junior high kids in it now," Hawkins said. "We already own the land for expansion but a bond issue we had on the April 2018 ballot failed by 34 votes."

The measure received more yes votes than no votes, but a super majority was required.

The current high school was built in 1958 following a successful bond referendum.

Wear said aside from the obvious technological evolution from telephones and typewriters to computers and the internet, the demographics of the Bayless District has seen the biggest change.

"We had a lot of Germans and Croatians (in earlier generations), but they all spoke the language. Now we have 35 different countries (represented) - a lot of Bosnians and Vietnamese especially - who don't all speak English coming into the district. That's a big challenge for the teachers."

Tucker said that it's important to look back on the history of the district, but more important to look forward.

"We have 1,700 kids enrolled this year, we are growing and need to expand. We have an academic standard we want to maintain that we call the 'power of 15.' That means our goal is for every child to have earned at least 15 college credits here before they leave high school. Research indicates that the likelihood a student will attain at least an associate's degree increases dramatically with advance placement," Tucker said.

"The community has been very supportive of Bayless schools since back in 1868, and that rings true today," Tucker said.