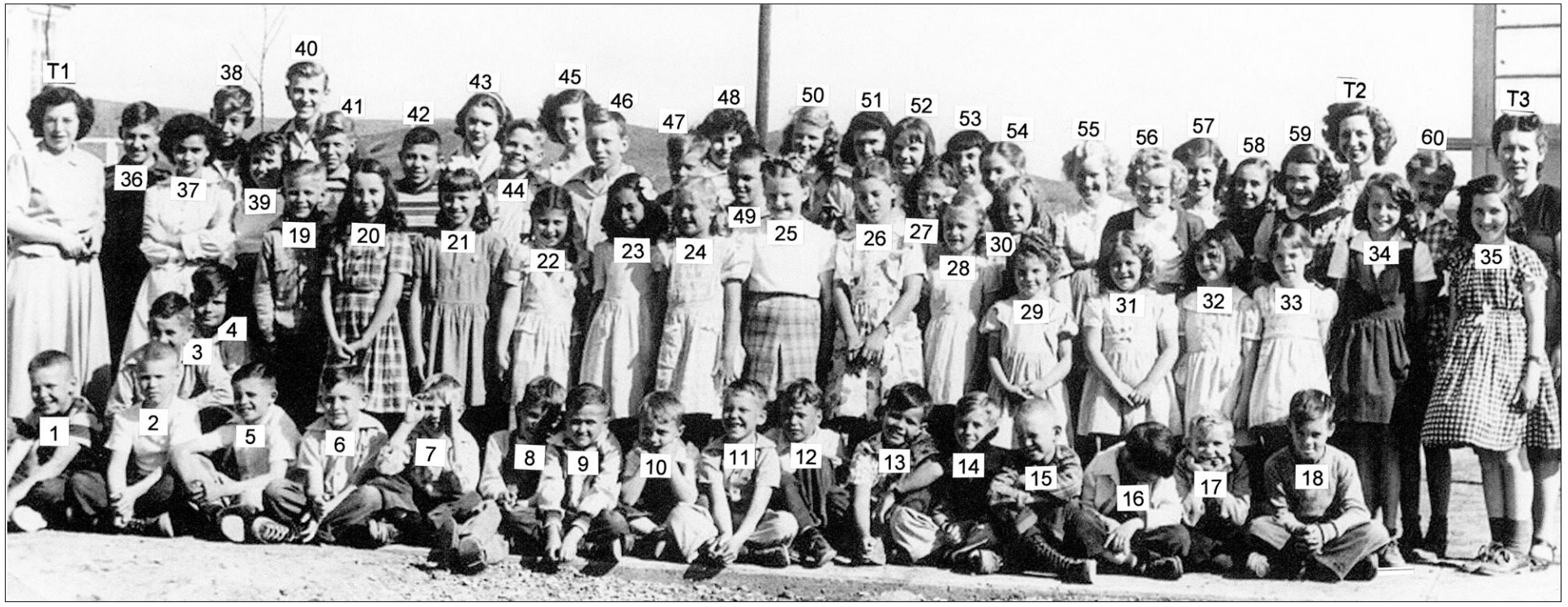


Pickstown



COURTESY PHOTO

The "James Avenue School" photo from the Pickstown School District, circa the spring of 1948. No. 13 in the front row is Tom Brokaw, who later moved to Yankton and graduated from Yankton High School.

Ghosts Of Pickstown

Pickstown School Was Open For Just Two Decades, But Remains One Of The More Unique School Districts In State History

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF
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Tom Brokaw's broadcasting career has taken him around the world, placing him in the midst of historic figures and events.

However, the former "NBC Nightly News" anchor considers his eight years at the Pickstown school among the best times of his life.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Brokaw's father worked as a construction foreman at the nearby Fort Randall Dam on the Missouri River. The younger Brokaw attended the Pickstown school from second grade through his freshman year in high school.

"A part me will always be at 111 Lewis," Tom Brokaw said, referring to his family's home address.

The family remained there until moving to Yankton in 1955, where the elder Brokaw worked on Gavins Point Dam. Tom Brokaw graduated from Yankton High School and later attended the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

The family's story reflects the boom-and-bust history of Pickstown and its school, said town historian and 1953 graduate Art Trautman. The self-contained, planned community was created as a government town in 1946 in response to Fort Randall Dam construction.

At one point, Pickstown consisted of nearly 4,000 residents and ranked among the 10 largest South Dakota communities. However, the town's population dropped dramatically with the dam's completion in 1956. Today, the population stands at around 200.

The school existed from 1948-68, Trautman said. Because of the nature of dam construction, the school enrollment tended to be transient and fluctuate wildly, he said.

During its 20-year history, 41 percent of Pickstown's students attended the school for one year or less. The school saw 64 percent of its students attend two years or less, and 77 percent attended three years or less.

"We had 1,600 students who started a year at Pickstown, but we had only 30 who went all 12 years," he said. "We had 181 who graduated from Pickstown, and 18 of them attended the school for only one year."

Enrollment fluctuated greatly not only from year to year but even within a single year. He pointed to one school year where the enrollment rose from 471 in the fall to 528 by the next spring.

"Many families would arrive in early spring when the majority of construction began and then leave in late fall when most of the work would shut down for the winter," Trautman said.

The school hit a low enrollment of 112 in 1956-57, added town historian and 1955 graduate Guy Rhoades.

"After the low point, enrollment grew back to 229 in 1963-64," he said. "That (increase) was largely due to

the start-up of the Air Force Radar Station just outside Pickstown, which operated from 1961 until 1968."

The influx of newcomers included those with varied cultural backgrounds, Rhoades said.

"School enrollment surged with children of Air Force parents," he said. "This brought in many interesting students, such as a second grader who spoke four languages - English, French, Spanish and Japanese."

However, enrollment slumped again, with the Pickstown school's numbers dropping to 182 during the final term of 1967-68.

ON THE GROW

The Pickstown school facilities were as planned as the rest of the model community.

The first school for Pickstown was opened in September 1947, using a converted duplex house on James Avenue for grades 1-8. The school opened with 20 students and two teachers. By spring 1948, the school had grown to 62 students and three teachers.

The duplex was small and space was limited, so when the enrollment increased, some students attended in the morning and the rest attended in the afternoon. High school students were bused to the Lake Andes school, as well elementary students prior to 1947.

The new school building opened in 1948.

Construction of the school building began April 3, 1948, and continued even as the school was opened Sept. 13, 1948. The building structure was complete, but some finishing touches with the classrooms and halls were completed during school hours. The gym was last to be completed and was ready for use in late December 1948.

"The building was one of the most modern in the state," Trautman said.

Bus service was not provided, but some local students outside Pickstown attended the school. More local students were added after completion of the highway across the dam.

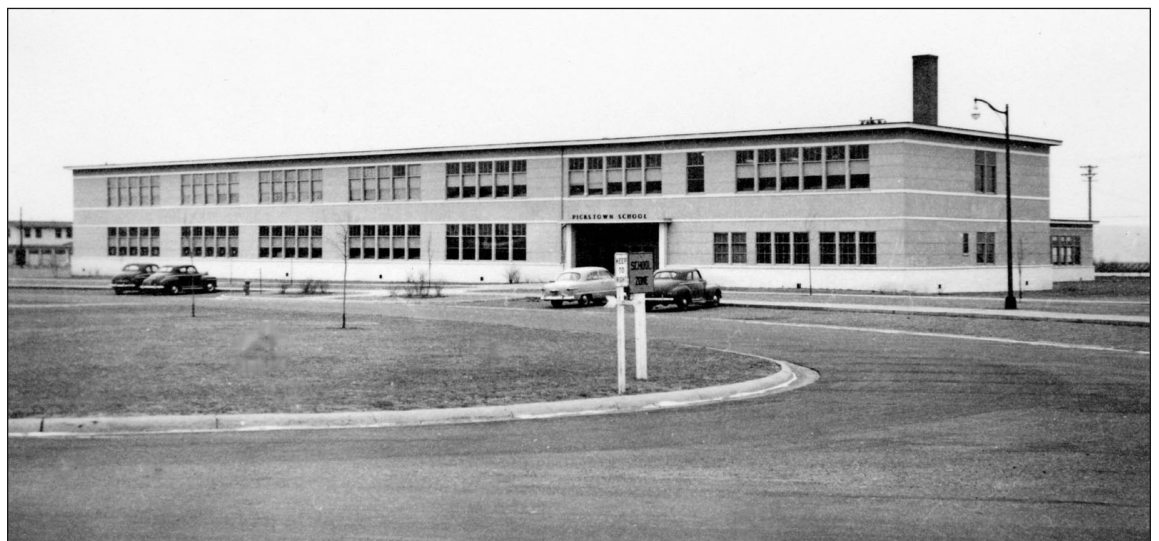
During its 20-year history, Pickstown High School enrolled a total of 980 students. The first graduating class in 1949 had three students, while the last graduating class in 1968 had 10 students.

The high school peaked at 79 students in 1954-55 but reached a low of 23 in 1956-57, Rhoades said. The smallest graduating class was two students in 1958, and the largest graduating class of 15 came in 1961.

During the school's history, Pickstown students were educated by 61 high school teachers and 68 grade school teachers.

How transient was the student body?

Trautman figured if they had all remained at Pickstown, the school would have seen graduating classes of 115 in 1961 and 100 in 1965. In all, eight classes would have graduated more than 75 members.



COURTESY PHOTO

ABOVE: The Pickstown school building, which was opened for students in 1948. The first students of the school met in a converted duplex house on James Avenue. The building was demolished in the late 1970s. BELOW: Many items of memorabilia are preserved and on display at the Pickstown museum, the dedication of which was held in June with a large ceremony.



KELLY HERTZ/P&D

ATHLETIC SUCCESS

The school's unique history was reflected in its team names and publications, Rhoades said.

"The school annual was named the 'Castle' after the Corps of Engineers' insignia," he said. "The athletic teams were initially called the Warriors and then soon changed to the Engineers - again, being named after the Corps. Oddly, the school song was 'Anchors Aweigh.'"

The first four school newspapers were also called the "Warrior" until the publication's name was changed to the "Transit" with the fifth publication in late October 1948.

The Pickstown sports teams enjoyed success during the school's brief history, Trautman said, the school won its first conference basketball championship in 1953, and the school year also saw the only conference football championship.

Rhoades recalled the basketball title team.

"Being interested in and participating in sports was a particularly exciting as the 1952-53 basketball team was highly rated among the state's Class B schools," he said. "Four of the starting five were 6-foot3 to 6-foot-6 in height, which was most unusual for a small school."

The school won district basketball championships in 1967 and 1968, Trautman said.

While Pickstown enjoyed athletic success, the early years were filled with trials and tribulations, he noted.

"I think the most interesting and courageous teams are the football and basketball teams of 1948-49, the first year. And of course, everyone wanted to beat up on the new kid in

town," he said.

"High school enrollment was only 36 for that first year. With this limited enrollment and with many students that had never played football or basketball before, the first year athletic program was less than successful."

The available facilities posed a challenge, Trautman said.

"The football field and locker room was usable, and the football schedule began with very limited practice. The results were not good," he said.

"Basketball practice was held in the (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) test lab building with a very low ceiling without the benefit of a basket. The basketball season was off to a dismal start with games played at other schools."

The Pickstown teams also suffered from small numbers for their rosters, Trautman said.

"The number of boys available to play football and basketball was so limited that the seventh and eighth grade boys were allowed to play on the high school team," he said.

In 1949, the football team included two juniors, four freshmen, seven eighth graders and two seventh graders.

The starting line-up included two juniors, two freshmen, one eighth grader and one seventh grader.

The Pickstown football team picked up two wins. First, the team defeated a Wagner freshman team in a six-man game. The second win came over a Marty Mission team that was playing football for the first time in several years.

The basketball team didn't win a

single game. The varsity team consisted of two juniors, two freshmen and an eighth grader.

Pickstown registered what is thought to be the state's longest losing streak of 71 basketball games, Trautman said. The team broke the losing skin with a 25-18 victory over Lynch, Nebraska, on Dec. 1, 1959. The winning streak lasted one game.

The losing record included the last two games of the 1954-55 season, all of the next three seasons and the first game in 1958-59.

PRESERVING HISTORY

The Pickstown school closed after spring 1968, when it consolidated with Lake Andes. The Pickstown school building continued to be used by the Andes Central school district for some grade school students until 1975. The school building was demolished in the late 1970s.

Thankfully, Pickstown residents and alumni salvaged parts of the school's history, Trautman said.

"Bob Hegler, a member of the PHS Class of 1962, lives in Cortland, Nebraska, and was visiting in Pickstown when they were working on the school building," he said. "Bob asked if he could cut the center piece (from the basketball court) and keep it. They said yes. Bob put a brass name plate on it and put it in the room with other school items that had been saved by Almon Adam, a local resident from across the river."

Adam lived his entire life on a farm near Fort Randall and was familiar with Pickstown's history, Trautman said.

"The workers had placed the senior school pictures and athletic trophies in a pile in front of the school. He salvaged all of it, and we are very grateful that he did," the historian said. "The school building was totally dismantled. The gym floor boards were used in the Lynch, Nebraska, community center and to build a bar in a Spencer saloon."

The school's scoreboard was donated to the Pickstown museum by Terry Cizek of Spencer, Nebraska, and restored by the museum committee. The basketball hoop and backboard was located by Red Allen of Lake Andes and was painted and mounted on the museum wall.

In addition, Hegler renovated a popcorn machine from the school, Rhoades said. Other memorabilia in

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-THOMAS A. EDISON

