

## Building History

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by John Grant

Title: Old and New Bricks

First it was called Oakland High School and Oakland Elementary School, because both groups of students met in the same building. However, for a number of years, people generally referred to it as "the school Oakland building." Later, after the new Garrett County Court House was built and the High School took over the old court house building, it was called Oakland Grammar School. This was refined to Oakland Elementary, then Center Street Elementary.

After it ceased to be an elementary school, it had multi-designations; Senior Citizen's Center, Oakland Branch of Garrett Community College, and a whole host of different names as different programs needed space in the building.

Yet, through the years, it remained basically, a big solid brick building originally constructed almost a century ago to be a school house. Today, it stands at the corner of Center and Wilson Streets, still a vital part of the Community, and, once more, a multi-designated building.

### Site Older Than County

The site of the building was originally purchased by the Allegany County Commissioners for a school house back in 1868, six years before Garrett County was formed. A small school building was erected on two lots of Pennington's Addition to the town of Oakland. As the town grew, so did the need for a larger school program.

"High School" was the next educational step for students during the 1890's, and, in the 1894, the County Commissioners laid plans for the original part of the brick building which is there today. A number of local products were used in its construction; lumber for near-by Garrett County saw mills, bricks from kilns which existed in the bottom land opposite the cee Dee Restaurant, etc.

## Fire Brings First Major Renovation

Through the years following its completion, the school was kept up-to-date with installation of electric lights, and changes in plumbing and heating equipment. Likewise, it became the location for summer programs such as a Normal School for Garrett County teachers. Then, in September of 1922, disaster struck. The bell tower and second floor of the building were gutted by a fire.

The Republican for Thursday, September 14, 1922 carried a long column about the fire and its damage.

"About half past five on Sunday morning last, Mr. Samuel Aronhalt, who has charge of the city's water pumps from that hour until later in the day, was passing the Oakland Grammar School building on Center Street when he discovered that the entire building was on fire, as smoke was pouring from beneath the cornices on all sides and through crevices in other portions of the structure, Mr. Aronhalt immediately alarmed the town and in a comparatively short time the fire fighting equipment was upon the scene and water from two sides of the building was being poured through the hoses."

"The water pressure was weak, however, owing to a shortage in the reservoir, and not much headway could be made toward putting the fire out before it had burned through a portion of the second floor and practically destroyed the belfry, the ceilings in several of the rooms and in one or two instances the heavy timbers supporting the roof."

"Those who have inspected the building since the fire occurred report that the second floor rooms are practically gutted, as well as the roof timbers being so weakened by the flames burning through many of them, that that portion of the building is beyond repair."

Indeed, parts of the building were "beyond repair." The belfry was never rebuilt, and the structure of the roof was modified to allow installation of new timbers where it was deemed necessary.

After an emergency meeting of the school Board, it was decided to use the High School building on a split-shift basis. Children of the grade school would attend classes there during the afternoon from one until four in the afternoon. High School classes met from eight in the morning until Noon.

This seemed to have been a workable plan, although some older residents of the community who were in the elementary school at that time recall classes being held in other places too.

## Consolidation

Through the 1920's the Garrett County School Board had been following a policy to gradually close the one room schools in the County. This policy continued fairly smoothly until 1930, when there was a massive consolidation of students from the one room schools into larger elementary schools such as the one in Oakland. A major program of busing the students to these schools was begun and the result was severe overcrowding of the class rooms.

Not only was the interior of the building put to use, but the grounds around the building continued to be a recreation area for Oakland youths. During the 1970's a regular recreation program was inaugurated with the installation of flood lights for night use. Well organized and directed, it added to the centrality of activity for the Oakland community.

## Major Concern

Time brought changes in programs and use of the big brick building. First one and then another activity moved out of the old structure until it was vacant. Although the recreation programs outside continued, nothing took place in the building itself. Naturally, there was a gradual deterioration of the whole structure, and it reached the critical point of facing massive renovation or being raised.

## Garrett Multi-Service Center

Garrett Community Action was one of the agencies which had used the building for some of its programs. It was this agency which took the lead in arousing public interest and the search for money to renovate the old Center Street School. Although there was a great deal of sentiment attached to the big brick structure, sentiment alone could not restore the building to its former competence.

Duane Yoder of the Community Action Committee pointed out that the central location of the building presented an ideal place for combining some of the Committee's activities. He described a way that the building could house almost all of the programs of that organization. As a multi-service center, it could include a senior citizen center, facilities for Head Start and child day care programs, as well as the administrative offices of the Community Action agency.

In addition, the extensive playground area around the old school building could be used as a combination parking lot and center for the after-school and summer recreation programs.

## A New Use For Old Bricks

It took time, but the proposed multi-service center has now become a reality.

The old Center Street Elementary School has become the administrative offices for the Garrett County Community Action Committee. In September, two Head Start programs began operation in the building, with the children's recess period in the old school yard of generations past. Some former class room space has been redesigned to provide 10 "sheltered" apartments for elderly citizens who require 24 hour attention.

Once Again the massive brick structure called Oakland High School, Oakland Grammar School. plus many other names, has become a center for community activity in the town.