



Parked in the Past

Como High School, an unplanned time capsule of earlier days

Artifacts uncovered from Como's heyday

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At a Park County board of county commissioner's meeting last July, a time capsule was opened from the former McNamara Hospital building, completed in 1966 (see the July 27 Flume). It contained photographs, post cards, a poster for the 1965 Burro Days celebration, and a Denver Post story about limited funding for the new hospital. The items were purposely chosen as representative of life in Fairplay at the time.

But imagine how much more history would be revealed if items weren't chosen with particular care. Consider how much our descendants would learn about each of us, if in the instant this sentence is read, our homes were locked and all our possessions were untouched for 70 years.

It happened at the Como High School. An entire building – an unplanned time capsule – has been preserved since the early 1940s.

That's when the high school closed and busing to Fairplay began. It was locked

with all of the school's supplies, books and science experiments inside. A few years later, the larger grade school closed, and when that building was remodeled into a community hall, elementary school memorabilia was moved into the high school for storage.

And the school sat, barely touched, until sometime in the 1990s.

Some hidden treasures of the past are just now being discovered, as the community comes together in its effort to record and preserve the past.

1940

By 1940, trains no longer ran from Como to link it with Denver, Breckenridge, Leadville and Gunnison. The last train left the station in April 1937, and the tracks were pulled up in 1938. The automobile route over Boreas Pass was constructed in the 1950s, but in 1940, Como was dying a slow death.

Only one student, Marion Gibbony, graduated in 1940. Gibbony's cousin and Como native Gertrude Anderson (Como

High School class of 1936) said in a June 2011 conversation with The Flume that the last class to graduate from Como High School was her cousin's class.

It could be that the school went on for one year longer; there is a partial draft of a high school annual in the old school for the term of 1940-41 and a newsletter written by students dated March 1941. It could be there were no seniors in 1941.

Early school history

In 1882, the South Park Line was completed to Breckenridge, and soon up to 26 trains a day passed through Como. Families of railroaders moved to Como, and in 1883, a large school was built on the hill above town at 6th and Spruce streets.

Como was in its prime in 1910. It was the largest town in Park County, with a population of 475, according to the 1910 U.S. Census. There were 83 school-age children (ages 6-17).

The next-largest town was Alma, at 401 residents, followed by Fairplay, with 311. There was no listing for Bailey in the 1910 census, but Chase, near present-day Shawnee, had 119 residents, and 210 people were counted at Deer Valley, near the present day Bailey-based Horn Cemetery.

As Como grew, the town realized the need for a separate high school. In 1930, an abandoned Presbyterian church was moved to a site near the original school and it became Como High School.

And inside that converted church was discovered a historian's dream, a hodgepodge of classroom memorabilia with discoveries (so far) dating from about 1910 into the 1940s.

Time-worn treasures

The mementos left in the high school are not valuable in a monetary sense, but they give a glimpse into the history of the Como schools and of the students and teachers who made their mark in Como. Student surnames recorded in teachers' registers are names prominent in the railroading era; some of those students became second-generation railroaders.

Seeing the school is a rare treat. It is open to the public each year on Boreas Pass Railroad Day, the third Saturday in August. And fortunate students of varying ages and backgrounds visit the historic structure on field trips. During those trips, they experience a day of school taught as it was decades ago.

School memorabilia

One wonders what catches the attention of modern-day students.

Could it be the large jar with the rusted lid that smells strongly of formaldehyde? The jar no longer contains the preserving liquid, but it does contain two crawdads probably looking much the same as they did when unknown schoolchildren placed them in the jar more than 70 years ago.

Or could it be the giant "Dick and Jane" book? The pages flip up in a design made so it can be placed in the front of the room so all young students can read together: "Dick. See Dick. See Dick run."

Maybe children have an eye on the teacher's paddle, kept handy in earlier days to discipline unruly students. Some time ago, the paddle was used to stir a can of paint and it now carries that stain.

Teacher registers

It's not a full collection, but teachers' registers from several years are among the items at the school. From those books, history scholars have a list of

students for the term, with boys and girls names on separate pages.

From one register that looks almost new, we know that on Tuesday, Sept. 3, 1912, school started in Como. Esther S. Martin made \$90 per month teaching between nine and 19 students each term (19 in the fall term, 9 in the winter term and 13 in the spring term) in grades 1 – 8. We know what textbooks were used and who visited the school.

It is interesting that Martin was the only teacher who wrote that the condition of the school was “bad, very bad.” Teachers in other years recorded the school condition as “medium.”

Martin wrote in her remarks, “The school house needs a thorough cleaning. It should have a new floor. The whole building needs to be carefully fumigated.”

She also said the school needed some good wall maps and “new (window) shades are almost a necessity – for the good of the pupils’ eyes.”

Martin taught in the 1913 – 1914 term as well. And in that year’s teacher register, she was still requesting a new floor, maps and window shades. In addition to a rope for the school flag, she requested “a damper in the stove pipe to save fuel on windy days.” She also requested: “Two screens, one for each window, to keep out the flies which torment the children for months.”

Classes

A wide variety of textbooks were found in the old school. And from those, we know children raised in Como received a well-rounded education. High school classes from Donald O. Durning’s 1935 teacher register included physics, English, algebra, economics, sociology, world progress history, biology and typing. We

know that at one time Latin and French languages and commercial law were taught; well-worn textbooks in those subjects were found in the school.

Incidentally, Durning was not only the teacher; he was the principal. He was a college graduate with Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees and had 36 months teaching experience. He made \$125 per month and was the only high school teacher. There were 22 students in grades 9 – 12.

Books

Mark Twain once said, “The man who does not read books has no advantage over the man that cannot read them.”

If students in Como did not read, it was not due to lack of books. Numerous boxes of books were stored in the Como High School for more than 70 years. They are in the process of being cataloged, and when that is done, the books will be available for use again. The Como Civic Association, owner of the two historic schools, has plans to allow book use inside the old grade school.

There are several collections of textbooks on many subjects for elementary students through high school. And there are single copies of other books.

One example is a rain-damaged but still-legible edition of the “Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror,” about the earthquake of 1906. It includes graphic photos of the destruction experienced in California, including photos of thieves robbing the dead and dying.

There is “Franklin, His Life by Himself,” published in 1891. The book includes a photo of Benjamin Franklin, looking much younger than on our current \$100 bill, but with the same hairstyle and physique.

A book, "Lessons in English, Book Two" by Arthur Lee gave the students knowledge of sentence structure and relationships between verbs, nouns, adverbs and adjectives.

"The Presidents of the United States" is a book about the lives of the presidents "from Washington to the present time." It ends with Benjamin Harrison, who was the 23rd president and left office in 1893.

More

There are plans to work through the winter months to catalog more documents and memorabilia, to uncover the mystery and discover more of the history of Como.

Images on the following page



One-Room Class

The Como High School today looks almost as if students had just been dismissed for lunch. In 1935 there were 22 students taught in this room in grades 9 through 12. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



1890s school

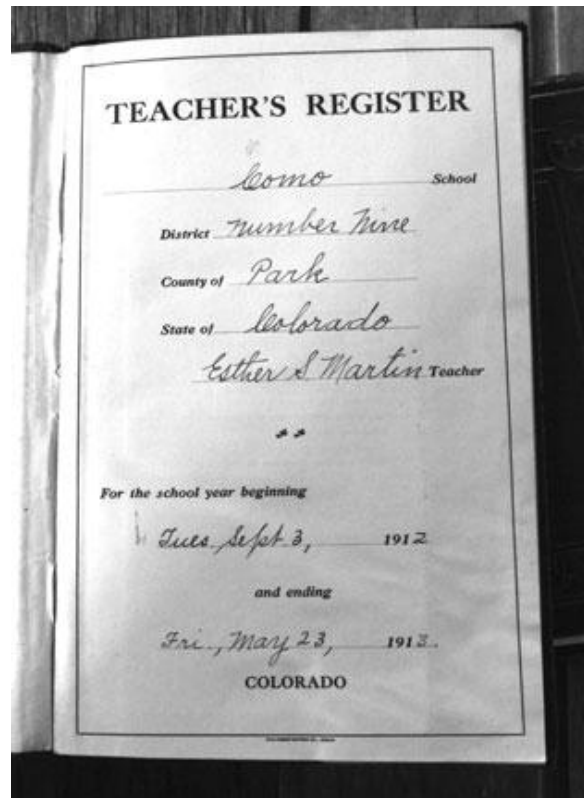
Children gather for a school photo circa 1890s at the Como School. From 1883 to 1930, all grades were taught in this two-room school. In 1930, high school classes were taught in a converted church near the grade school. (Photo courtesy of the Park County Local History Archives, Boot-Hall Family Collection)



1936
With love to William - From Mrs. Thiede

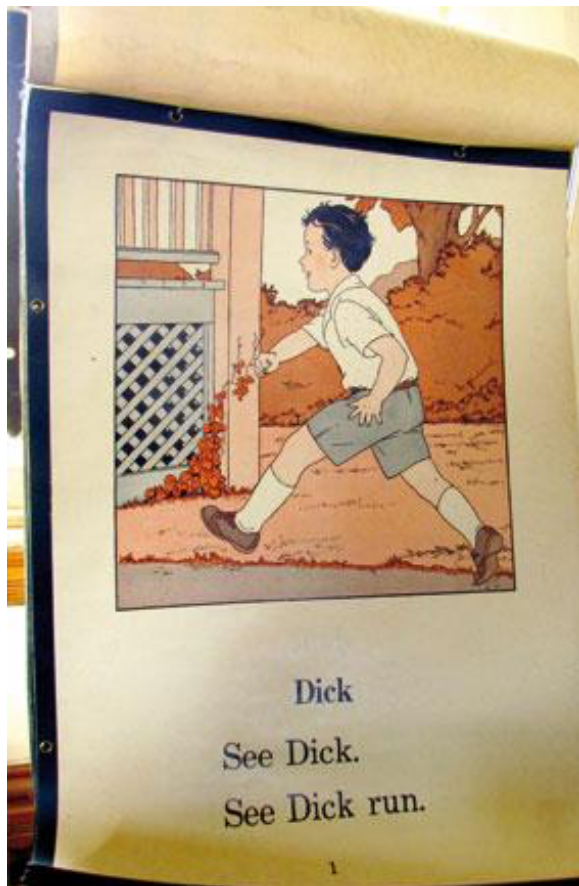
Primary Grades 1936

School children pose for a photo in 1936 in front of the grade school. The caption indicates the photo is from Mrs. Thiede. She taught first, second and third grades in the 1936-37 term at the Como grade school. The caption indicates, "With love to William," but there was not a William listed as a student in her teacher's register. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives)



Teacher's register

Esther Martin taught at the Como school for at least two school years, 1912-1913 and 1913-1914. In this register she wrote the condition of the school is "bad, very bad." (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Dick
See Dick.
See Dick run.

See dick run

This large-sized Dick and Jane book was used in the primary room at the Como grade school to teach children to read. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)