

## Growth of Schools

As white families moved into the Vollintine/Evergreen neighborhood, they began to plan for a school for their children. Two schools for Negro children had been built several years earlier. They were Carnes School built in 1905 at 943 Lane Avenue for grades 1-8 and Klondike built in 1902, at 1250 Vollintine with grades 1-8.<sup>1</sup>

In 1909 John Bayard Snowden, and his brother, R. Brinkley Snowden offered the Board of Education a tract of their land, 200 feet on the north line of Summer/Speedway (now North Parkway) and 420 feet along the east line of North McLean to the south line of Faxon. They stipulated the terms of the gift. First, the city must build a brick or stone school of such size, character and design as to be an "ornament" to the Evergreen neighborhood. Second, the offer must be accepted within sixty days, and third, the school must be built quickly. Surprisingly, the offer was not immediately accepted. Dr. G. B. Malone, president of the School Board, called the land a "frog pond" and contended it was not a fit site for a school. "There is a bayou running through it," he was quoted as saying.<sup>2</sup>

The next day, however, the School Board inspected the property in the midst of a heavy rain. Board members saw no sign of water, and the Snowdens' proposition was unanimously accepted. This was said to be the first instance on record in Memphis of a citizen having given property for a school site.<sup>3</sup> This same article describes the neighborhood as "one of the most desirable, high-class residence districts in the city and one which is rapidly being built up."<sup>4</sup> The property was evaluated at approximately \$50 to \$60 per front foot.<sup>5</sup>

Snowden School, named for its donors, was built in 1909 with grades one through eight at a cost of \$55,000.<sup>6</sup> (See picture) Walter S. Dugger was the first principal.

It opened with ten classrooms. In 1910 there were 155 pupils. Six more classrooms were added in 1913. A very large addition of twenty-one classrooms and a gym was made in 1924. In 1939 a cafeteria and auditorium were built. Seven thousand square feet were added in 1955; this space was used for shop and band facilities. A 1957 renovation converted the original gym to art rooms and classrooms; a new gym was constructed. The School Board expressed its faith in Snowden when in 1979 it added 32,900 square feet at a projected cost of \$1,118,132 providing a new library, home economics facilities, three science rooms, an art complex, two classrooms, space for industrial arts, a music facility, and three teacher stations.<sup>7</sup>

The Parent-Teacher Association was begun in 1911 at Snowden. The fact that it was the first P.T.A. in Memphis and Shelby County and became the largest in the state by 1925 demonstrates the extent of parental support of the school.<sup>8</sup> Mrs. E. O. Bailey was the first president; in those days the dues were five cents. It was a very active group, and through the years it raised much money for needed equipment and fought for needed changes. In 1920 the P.T.A. contributed \$25 to the Presbyterian college to encourage the college to relocate in Memphis. Some projects, such as a light at McLean and Parkway, took a long time. In 1920 when additions were contemplated to several schools, Snowden was not included. The Evergreen Improvement Club and the P.T.A. became advocates of Snowden's inclusion. The committee reported that 466 pupils were being taught at Snowden which had accommodations for no more than 320. The crowded conditions were due to the city's contracting with the county to educate county children at specific schools. Snowden and Guthrie were affected.<sup>9</sup>

Pupils were instructed in the halls and basement. One father claimed that his child caught pneumonia from the damp basement. Others declared that the school was so dark that occasionally the pupils had to forego their studies.<sup>10</sup>

The overcrowded conditions led to the purchase of the two and a half adjoining acres, thereby doubling the campus. It was purchased from the Memphis Investment Company, and the 1924 annex to the school was built on it.<sup>11</sup>

The school had several memorable principals. Professor A. C. Nute, 1919-1925, was certainly one of these. However, his new ideas led to several controversies. One involved milk for the students. The mothers were buying milk for the children and serving it in containers other than the original containers. This resulted in the passing of a city ordinance which required that in the future milk be served in the original containers.<sup>12</sup> In May of the same year Professor Nute was charged with teaching evolution. He was defended by St. Elmo Newton, patron of Snowden and past president of the Evergreen Improvement Club. Professor Nute was exonerated.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Nute introduced the idea of a Kiddie Band to Memphis; Snowden had a fifty-children band, the first of its kind "Down in Dixie."<sup>14</sup> Dancers from Snowden made the newspaper in the spring of 1922.

500 boys and girls of Snowden School yesterday tripped across an outdoor stage of natural beauty in Overton Park in a lovely series of interpretative dances. Audience was composed mostly of fond mothers. The folk festival is an innovation in the education world of Memphis and well illustrates the degree of community spirit in the Snowden section.<sup>15</sup>

Several principals such as W. E. Miller and P. C. Hutchinson served long terms. Other men served shorter periods, but the faculty remained constant and good. Mrs. George Morrow, president of the P.T.A. in 1968, recalled that the school enjoyed strong neighborhood support well into the 1960s. She also commented on the

excellent job done by Frank Farino, principal, and the bank director, Mr. Thomas.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1960s as the racial balance of the neighborhood began to change, support of the school lessened.

Snowden did not escape the vandalism that plagued the public schools in the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> There were several incidents reported this past year as well.

As integration increased in Memphis in 1971, VECA was named a 'friend of the court.' This meant that the organization had a vested interest in integration of the schools, and they were allowed to be heard at court. VECA's position was that no children should be bussed from or into Vollentine or Snowden Elementary because they were already integrated. Under Plan Z, the court ruled that these two schools should be paired. All students in the two assigned areas were to report to Vollentine for grades 1 to 3; all students were to report to Snowden for grades 4 to 6. In June of 1973 assignments were made to produce a 60 percent black enrollment and 40 percent white enrollment.<sup>18</sup>

VECA and other groups worked to ease the transition. In June 1973 Principal Rochester Neely of Vollentine attributed the exceptionally smooth transition to a total community involvement which included parents, faculties, P.T.A., and VECA. Joe Taylor, principal of Snowden, was also "real pleased though he admitted to some touchy situations."<sup>19</sup> P.T.A. President Jane Richardson (Mrs. Robert) wrote, ". . . please don't destroy a potentially outstanding year arguing over any child's color."<sup>20</sup> In spite of all efforts, many whites left the public schools.

By January 1976 the racial distribution at Snowden was 76.4 percent black to 23.6 percent white.<sup>21</sup> The current enrollment shows 869 black to 250 white or 77.7 to 22.3 percent.<sup>22</sup>

In 1975 red headed Don Coffey, former pro football player for the Denver Broncos and Pittsburg Steelers, became principal. He believed more emphasis should be

placed on academics. Snowden became an academic optional school, which gave it drawing power for good students. It has CLUE, i.e. Creative Learning in Unique Environment, a city-wide program for gifted children.<sup>23</sup> Snowden provides many extras in its curriculum. It is the only school offering an elementary band program and string music. They also have an Orff music program. There are three junior high bands. In 1979 Coffey was succeeded as principal by Ronnie Bynum.

Snowden is one of the city schools in which the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association is sponsoring a Community Education Program. The purpose of the project is to build a partnership between the school and the community. This involves organizing the community around the school and adjusting the school program to the needs of the community.

#### VOLLENTINE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, 1682 Vollintine Avenue

As early as 1927 the Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club was exploring ways to get another school in its neighborhood. Members complained that children had to walk one to one and a half miles, "yet we are paying heavy school taxes, and we must be included in this year's budget."<sup>24</sup>

The education committee looked for a good location. Mr. McNeely communicated with Col. W. L. Terry who replied that the corner acreage of Evergreen and Vollintine could be purchased for \$2,500 per acre.<sup>25</sup>

This acreage had been part of the Chestnut Grove Dairy and was generally known as Mr. Barham's pasture; Mr. Barham, son-in-law of R. A. Terry, had last operated the dairy. The civic club got its wish; a school was to be built. Quickly there were suggestions for a name. Several appeared in the minutes: The W. J. Prescott School, the John T. Walsh School or the Jackson Heights School.<sup>26</sup>

General usage won the day. For lack of a formal name, the school was referred to as Vollentine in the planning stage; the name stuck. In 1930 the twelve-room school with an auditorium was built and named Vollentine Elementary School. It was built for grades one through six.

In the fall of 1936, 545 students were enrolled. In 1937 new classrooms were added as a W.P.A. project. This increased the capacity of the school by 320 students and made it one of the largest grade schools in the city.<sup>27</sup> To the joy of its students Vollentine was the first school to have its own television set. It was presented by Charles Klotwog of Charles Furniture Co. and installed in the school auditorium.<sup>28</sup>

The Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club organized a Shrub Day to provide landscaping for the newly built school. The club and individuals donated shrubs and trees.<sup>29</sup>

Vollentine, like Snowden, was a focal point for neighborhood gatherings and activities.

At the P.T.A. dinners in Vollentine the Greek women brought Greek dishes, the Jewish women brought Jewish dishes, the Italian women brought Italian dishes, and everybody just had one great time. Nobody worried about insulting anyone else's ethnic background . . . People were people. We weren't as sensitive then as people are today about anything.<sup>30</sup>

The Supreme Court ruling on integration took place in 1954. But in Memphis as in most cities the change was not reflected immediately. In 1958 an article in the Press Scimitar detailed an attempt by an eight-year-old Negro boy, Gerald E. Young, to attend Vollentine Elementary School. His mother, Mrs. George B. McFerrin, lived at 1215 North Evergreen, about five blocks from the school. His request was denied. The mother wired

Superintendent Stimbert a formal request. Stimbert replied by special delivery letter that it was her privilege to make the request and that it would receive the same attention the other 5,000 requests received.<sup>31</sup> Gerald was not admitted.

As a result of this incident and others in the city a class action suit was filed in behalf of eight Negro children against the Memphis Board of Education. The case was entitled Northcross vs. Board of Education. There were eight Negro attorneys. Two were NAACP attorneys, i.e. Thurgood Marshall, now a Supreme Court Justice, and Constance Baker Motley of New York. The Memphis lawyers were A. W. Willis, Ben Hooks, Russell Sugarmon, H. T. Lockard, B. F. Jones and Ira Murphy. The suit charged racial bias in opposition to the 1954 Supreme Court Decision. The suit stated that Marjorie McFerrin applied for assignment of her son, Gerald, to Vollentine, "which is all white." He was denied a transfer from Hyde Park School, because he was a Negro.<sup>32</sup> Though there were many intervening steps, this case culminated in the desegregation plan known as Plan Z. This is a continuing case which means that the Memphis school system operates under a court order for desegregation and that the District Court monitors the system on a continuous basis.<sup>33</sup>

By 1962 Vollentine had one black student; in 1964 it had thirty-two. In 1973 Vollentine and Snowden were paired under Plan Z. By 1974 Vollentine suffered overcrowding. The school committee of VECA and the Cypress Health and Safety Committee complained about this situation. In 1979-80 most of the kindergarten classes were moved to Klondike. This plus the fact that there has been a natural decline in the number of students in public schools has alleviated the problem for the present.<sup>34</sup> Present enrollment is 524, with 475 blacks and 49 whites. Rochester Neely is principal.

#### CYPRESS JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 2109 Howell Avenue

This school, built in 1967, is located on the periphery of the neighborhood on a corner of University Park facing Brown and Howell. The two-story building has a library, forty classrooms, a cafetorium, and a reading center for special materials. Many of the walls are movable to allow adjustment of classroom size.<sup>35</sup> The building which cost \$2,253,617 to build was designed to accommodate 1,600 students. Dr. James Barber is the current principal. 1979-80 enrollment is 940, eighty of whom are white and 860 black.<sup>36</sup> In addition to its regular curriculum, the school has both Title I and SPAN (Start Planning Now) programs.

It was not long after completion that overflow sewage came into the basement of Cypress Junior High School. No solution was reached until Brother N. T. Greene led an aggressive campaign to correct the situation. His efforts were instrumental in pushing for a solution which entailed a new Cypress Creek main sewer line. The work on this was completed September 9, 1977.<sup>37</sup>

Some children in VECA attend Springdale Magnet, a school built in 1939 at 880 N. Hollywood as a white school. Today it is the only open-education-optional school in Memphis city schools.<sup>38</sup> The principal is Mrs. Walter Mary Ingram. The enrollment is 340 with a racial ratio of 240 blacks to 100 whites.

#### NORTHSIDE HIGH SCHOOL, 1212 Vollintine Avenue

As early as 1922 there were plans to build a high school for the northern section of the city. Leo Goodman tried to sell the Board of Education a five acre lot at Evergreen and Tutwiler for the school. He was quoted in an article in the Commercial Appeal as follows:

Such a site for the high school will be the most strategic one in the city if you look ahead 10 years. That section of the city will be thickly settled within the next 5 years.<sup>39</sup>