

1892 marked first high school graduation



Betty Lewis
Local columnist

That was Watsonville

The first actual building to house advanced students was built in 1894-95 but as early as 1879, Watsonville was lamenting the fact that there wasn't any high school in town. The following appeared in the Pajaronian: "If we had a high school it would be a benefit and an ornament to the school department. The advanced grade is over-crowded with pupils, many of whom are studying special studies, and these latter pupils should be placed in more advanced or high school."

Held in the grammar school, then located on East Lake Avenue, the advanced course consisted of history, English, physics, botany, physiology and some mathematics. Students who took some additional Greek or Latin could qualify for entrance into college. A regular high school course was instituted in 1891, which consisted of two years of study. Later, it was extended to three years as requirements for college entrance became stiffer.



On June 2, 1892, the first high school graduating class, consisting of 13 students, held its exercises at the Opera House then located across from the plaza. The high school classes grew in numbers and, in April of 1894, a school bond election was held for the construction of a high school building. There were 411 votes cast — 347 for and 64 against. The next month, a young architect who had designed the recently completed Christian Church was hired to prepare plans for the new school — his name was William Henry Weeks.

"A perspective drawing of the new school building prepared by Architect Weeks, has been hanging in the post office this week.

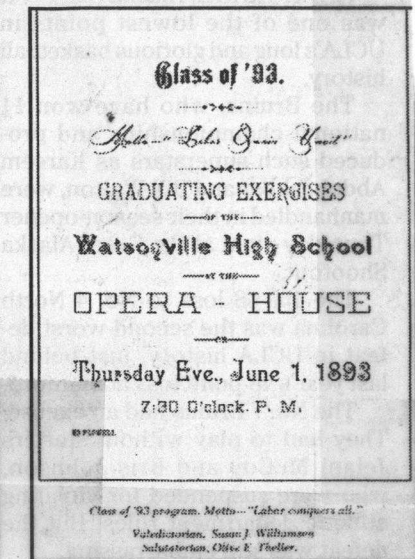
The exterior makes a handsome showing and such a structure will be an architectural ornament to the city and the handsomest school building in the coast counties of Central California. - The Pajaronian, August 2, 1894.

Land for the new building had been purchased on East Third (Beach) from Mrs. Peter Cox; nearly four acres between Lincoln and Marchant, for \$4,250 in gold coin. Eighty-six large timbers arrived from Puget Sound and construction began on the wooden building (it had originally been planned for redwood construction but pine was used instead — big mistake!)

Dedication for the new school was held on Aug. 2, 1895 and a pic-

ture of the new building appeared in the San Francisco Call on Aug. 3. Early in the morning of Nov. 8, 1901, a fire broke out on the second floor of the school and, within an hour, the whole building had been reduced to a pile of rubble, with only two tall brick chimneys still standing. The greatest loss to the community was the nearly complete loss of school records which had been so faithfully kept through the years.

Again Weeks was hired to draw up plans for a new high school and the ground was cleared near the corner of Marchant and East Third. Construction began on the new school which was completed in March of 1903. The teachers in 1904 were: Irving Townsend, S.P.



Maybach, F.M. Buzick, Florilla Wickersham, Oda Redman, Ida McAdam and Kara Allen.

By 1916, it was felt a bigger institution was needed and this resulted in some controversy over whom to select as the architect. Weeks had moved away from Watsonville in 1911 though he owned property in Aromas and was also still designing some buildings in town. Ralph Wyckoff, a local man who had trained in Weeks' office, was living and working in Watsonville. The school board, after weeks of discussion, chose Weeks as he had become well-known by then for his excellence in school designs. He was to include interior ramps inside the school; the first in California. Wyckoff was selected to design the Radcliff School on Rodriguez Street.

Land was purchased in 1926 for the school's athletic field. The high school gymnasium was built in

1938; the shop building in 1950 and 1953; then came the cafeteria and music room, swimming pool, laboratories and additional classrooms. The old high school (1903) was torn down in 1964 having served as the first site of Cabrillo College and a new library built in its place in 1966. The library was named for Ida A. Fuller who had served as the high school librarian for 36 years. Aptos High School was constructed in 1969 and the 1917 Watsonville high school was torn down and rebuilt after the 1989 earthquake.

There are now 2,423 students attending Watsonville High School; Nancy Bilicich is the principal and we are blessed with a wonderful performing arts center at the school to be enjoyed by the whole community.