

Edith Fikes' Scrapbook Recalls Gault's Early Days

By MILDRED ANN SMITH

Gault school soon will have a scrapbook on display which traces its history from the time it first opened its doors in 1888 to 1945.

Miss Edith Fikes, teacher and principal at Gault school for 35 years and county superintendent for another 10, is just completing the project she began many years ago.

It contains many things—pictures of the children and teachers through the years and their activities, newspaper clippings and information on Calvin Gault, early pioneer for whom the school was named.

Reading it one can not only trace the progress of a school but of its town as well.

School Opened in 1888

On the first page is pasted a clipping taken from the Santa Cruz Surf of September 22, 1888, which reads:

"The prettiest little school building hereabouts is the Gault school in Branciforte. It was finished in time for the opening of the current term and was named for an old and respected resident of Branciforte, Calvin Gault, Esq., who originally owned the land on which it stands.

"At present but one of the school rooms is occupied; here Miss Alice Steinmetz presides over 40 or more little folks, bright, happy and healthy looking. The grounds are 200 by 250 feet in dimensions."

The history of Calvin Gault was provided by former Santa Cruzan Gertrude Marsh Ryan. She writes that he was a native of Vermont and came to California before 1849 with his residence in Santa Cruz dating back to the early '70s or before.

Named For Land Donor

"His first home was on Gault street and he afterward bought the Kron and Effey tract of land, and divided it into lots. The block from Railroad street (Seabright avenue) to Sumner street was given for a school to be named for the donor. He also gave land for a church on Sumner street. He died at his home on Gault street sometime about 1900."

The church referred to was a Baptist church which later was moved to Pennsylvania avenue and eventually was purchased by the Seventh Day Adventists.

Ernest Otto tells of this in one of his Sentinel columns contained in the scrap book. He also notes that before Gault school was built the children attended the Branciforte school which was on the hill and was part of the lot now occupied by Santa Cruz hospital.

Old Families On Rolls

Many family names prominent in the early days and recognized today are listed on the early rolls of Gault school and many Santa Cruzans can find their own photographs among the graduating classes.

Some of these family names are Arana, Kaiser, Griffin, Carmean, Hoke, Bowles, Mosher, Amaya, Ebert, Beauregard, Teshara, Pilkington, Wright, Patterson, Barnhill, King, Sauters, Castro, Coats and Maciel.

By the time Miss Fikes began teaching at Gault in 1909 two additional rooms had been added to the original school.

It wasn't long before she became a teaching principal and as the area built up, had to contend with more "growing pains" in her school.

Classes In A Tent

In 1914 classes became so crowded that Miss Lulu Bond had to conduct her third grade class in a tent. This continued for more than a year until an old one-room building, formerly at the old Branciforte school, was moved onto the grounds. Later another small two-room building was constructed which doubled as a classroom and cafeteria.

Miss Fikes recalled that at one end of the classroom was a high platform so the cafeteria tables could be stored underneath.

"We would dismiss the children early so the older boys could go in and set up the tables."

Before that Miss Fikes used to heat soup on a kerosene burner.

"The burner was behind the piano right in my classroom. The older girls would open



MEMORIES OF GAULT—"This is the way Gault looked when your grandparents went to school there," Miss Edith Fikes, long-time teaching principal of Gault, tells children representing the third generations of their families to attend the school. Interested in the scrapbook pictures are the three Gilbert children (in foreground)

Frank, Dennis and Doris, whose grandfather, Frank Gilbert Sr., and whose father Frank Jr., attended Gault; and (in background) Martin Towne and his cousin, Leslie Kirby, whose grandmother, Mrs. Mildred Towne, was a Gault student as was Martin's father, Earl, and Leslie's mother, Barbara Towne Cardwell.



FIRST SCHOOL—Gault school had just been completed when this photograph was taken in the fall of 1888. Children up to then had attended Branciforte school which was located on the hill where Santa Cruz hospital now stands.

the cans at recess and I could step right behind the piano and give it a stir or two to keep it from sticking and go right on with my classwork."

This was the time too that there was a deep ditch in front of the school which overflowed during the rainy season.

Sentinel Reporter Laura Rawson wrote of this in a 1931 article tracing the history of the school.

Remember the Ditch?

"The ditch was a constant worry to teachers. Students were cautioned to walk in the middle of several little bridges which spanned the swiftly flowing ditch. Hip boots were often donned by the teachers when the rain came down in torrents, and at times both teachers and pupils had to be assisted by a span of mules drawing a heavy express wagon which would back up to the door and haul them to safety on dry land."

In the late '20s all Santa Cruz schools were feeling the pinch of the growing population and the Gault scrapbook contains clippings from The Sentinel and other newspapers

recording the fight for school bonds to build new schools. The bond issue finally passed permitting the erection of new schools at Gault, Mission Hill and Laurel.

Miss Fikes' Promotion

Miss Fikes became supervising principal at Gault in 1940 and four years later was appointed as county superintendent of schools, a position to which she re-elected twice, before retiring in 1954.

Looking back on her own long career in education, she is aware of the problems which face other teachers today.

"At Gault we taught subject matter, stressing reading and other basic skills but that isn't all we taught," she emphasized.

"We tried to teach our children respect for the law, for other people's property and for older people. And we tried to instill in them high aims and hopes for the future."

There are a good many generations of Gault students scattered around the country today who will tell you she succeeded.