

half-century later, memories remain strong

Final classes of Garfield, Gerstmeyer, Honey Creek, Wiley high schools finished up in 1971

By Mark Bennett

Tribune-Star

On the eve of Wiley High School's demolition in the summer of 1971, students and alums wandered its halls once more, holding candles. "We walked through and sang, 'The Hallowed Halls of Wiley,'" recalled Ann (Siebenmorgen) Bartley, a member of the bygone school's Class of '71 — its last.

That year, school consolidation markedly changed the configuration of education in Vigo County — the culmination of years of debate and planning. Garfield and Gerstmeyer high schools closed in June 1971 and merged into Terre Haute North Vigo High School later that fall. Honey Creek and Wiley high schools also closed that June, and combined that

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Iconic character: Gerstmeyer senior Kym Martin channels comedian Lily Tomlin's famous character Ernestine the telephone operator during the high school's play "Ask Any Girl" in the final 1970-71 school year.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association

After the end of the 1970-71 school year, Bradley Lorton, Garfield High School's final principal, breaks open a metal time capsule from the school's cornerstone set in 1911. It contained newspaper clippings detailing court battles and petitions pursued over the school's formation 60 years earlier.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association



Closer: As described in Gerstmeyer's "Scroll" yearbook, senior Jim Sullivan becomes the last of more than 9,000

fall to form Terre Haute South Vigo High School.

The 1970-71 school year was one to remember for most in each school's Class of '71, historically and personally.

"We were all determined and motivated to be the best and last class," Donna (Deardorf) Tidd said of Gerstmeyer's final class.

Fifty years later, the Vigo County School Corp. is once again assessing the future configuration of its high schools — North, South and West Vigo. As with the late 1960s and early '70s process, the current assessment started a few years ago. This year, a continuing series of public forums will lead to a School Board decision in January, followed by a ballot referendum in May 2022.

By the time seniors at Garfield, Gerstmeyer, Honey Creek and Wiley began that '70-71 school year, they were well aware of its historical impact.



Towering moment:

During Gerstmeyer High School's final football season, Black Cats cheerleaders formed a pyramid, comprised of (from left, bottom row) Kym Martin, Donna Deardorf, Joyce McGee and Patti Paitson; (second row) Jackie Steward and Becky Powell; and (top) Georgann Lindley.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association



graduates in the high school's history. Sullivan accepts his diploma from Principal John Valle and school board member William Llewellyn in June 1971.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Association



Final clash: Honey Creek tacklers Dave Knight, Bob Hilton, Jim Norris and Brad Shafer stop a Wiley ball carrier in the fall of the 1970-71 school year. The following season, the consolidation of Honey Creek and Wiley formed Terre Haute South Vigo High School.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association



“I think our teachers tried to keep us on an even keel and focused on academics to make it as normal as possible,” Tidd said. “But it was always ‘final’ this or that — final football game, final basketball game or whatever.”

“Everything was ‘the last,’” said Pam (Potts) Schalburg, a Wiley ‘71 grad.

Indeed, the four schools’ swansong yearbooks feature snippets and photos of “final” games and events, full of students wearing bell-bottom pants and miniskirts, and parking lots dotted with now-classic cars.

As time passes, the role classes of ‘71 inherited — as keepers of those four schools’ legacies — grows.

Memento: This coffee mug toasts Gerstmeyer High School’s Class of 1971, the last in the school’s history. It is on display in the Vigo County Educational Heritage Association Museum inside the former McLean school. “Tech,” as Gerstmeyer was commonly called, and rival Garfield consolidated into Terre Haute North Vigo High School in the fall of 1971.

Tribune-Star/ Mark Bennett



History comes full circle:

Last Red Streaks hoops squad:

Wiley High School’s final “Wileyan” yearbook lists the Streaks’ 1970-71 boys basketball team as (from left, kneeling) Leonard Wilson, Landis Fairrow, Floyd Lewis, Mike Worrel, Curtis Lyle and Greg James; (standing) Sylvester Wilson, Bill Llewellyn, Gary Sweatt, Jim Piepenbrink, Alan Gurman, Monte Yeager and Coach Howard Mathas.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association

Memories: A lot of rivalry

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“I think we’re kind of like the torchbearers of that,” said Jim Jeffers, a ‘71

to the city’s “downtown school.” Wiley’s open campus at lunchtime featured students eating

“You had all those traditions, and it was just wonderful to step into those,” said Kym (Martin)

Wiley grad. “We’re the last ones to go through that.”

Each school’s Class of ‘71 intends to reunite this year. The memories of their unique high school experience will undoubtedly flow. A few members of those classes shared a few of those reflections for this story by phone, Zoom calls, and in-person while gathered at an outdoor picnic table or coffeeshop this spring. Those 67- and 68-year-olds remain fond of those days.

‘Room for everybody’

After moving to seven different schools in 12 years, Rick Wilkerson appreciated his dad’s decision to commute to a new job in Bloomington so Rick could finish his senior year as a Honey Creek Bee.

Wilkerson immersed himself in activities at the former high school on Carlisle Road in southern Vigo County. Dances, ball games, clubs and the school newspaper tasks. “I

sack lunches from home or popping into local eateries like the Goodie Shop, the Toasty Shop, Terre Haute House’s sandwich shop, Phil and Bill’s and others.

One eatery, Jeffers said, let Wiley students “smoke cigarettes and nobody told on them.”

Each mentioned a teacher that influenced their. For Featherston, it was track and cross country coach Ed Scott. “He taught me to never give up,” Featherston said, “and that followed me all through my life.”

Featherston worked 47 years in the communications business before retiring. Bartley became a teacher, first in Illinois and then back in Vigo County. Schalburg worked as a medical technologist and as an administrative assistant. Jeffers spent 40 years with the Indiana Department of Revenue. Standley served 42 years in the U.S. Air Force. All credited their Wiley lessons.

Today, their Wiley Red Streaks’ school spirit

Marco, a member of the school’s Class of 71.

By May 1971, students and alums were celebrating a “Farewell to Gerstmeyer” open house, recalled another ‘71 grad Donna Tidd. Her parents were among Gerstmeyer’s thousands of alums. They graduated in 1941, and those high school sweethearts married the following year. “I think it was fate that I’d be in the last class,” Tidd said.

It was also fitting, she said, that an alum, John Valle, served as the last principal at “Tech.” “It was almost like he was Mister Gerstmeyer,” Tidd said. She was a cheerleader at Gerstmeyer and member of the dean’s advisory board, which included helping with Teacher Appreciation Day activities. Tidd became a teacher herself and retired in 2018.

Marco also was a Black Cats cheerleader, and later utilized the technical school’s practical lessons to build a career. After working in medical and

went to everything,” he said last month.

“It was the first time I was in a community that really seemed permanent, because of my nomadic parents,” Wilkerson added. “You just felt like there was something here before you, and you were going to take part of it with you.”

Honey Creek stood as a high school from 1926 until its merger with Wiley to form Terre Haute South in ‘71. The original building became a junior high when a “new” Honey Creek opened in 1959. The second building served as the high school and later as the junior high after the 1971 consolidation. Today, Honey Creek is the only one of the four North-South predecessors to still have a school wearing its name — Honey Creek Middle School, operating on the same property in a 1993-era building.

Classmate Ed Bennett and his fellow members Honey Creek’s Student Senate met with their counterparts

remains. Still, the reality of their niche as a bygone school’s last class sinks in each time they reunite.

“When we come back for reunions, we don’t have football games to see or homecomings,” Bartley said. “We don’t have something to go to.”

Purple Eagles, still

Dave Butts never rode a bus to school in his life. He walked to Collett Elementary, McLean Junior High and Garfield High School, all near his northside Terre Haute home at 10th Street and Buckeye. Butts seemed destined to graduate from Garfield, the school located in the heart of the 12 Points district with a “Spirit of 7-6” tradition dating back to a narrow Thanksgiving Day football win over Wiley in 1915.

His grandmother attended Garfield when it opened in 1912. His dad was a 1938 Garfield grad. Then, Butts became part of its final graduating class.

hospital laboratories, Marco worked 31 years at Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis.

“Gerstmeyer gave me a great background to do a lot of things,” Marco said.

Cathy Allen was also among those 370 members of the Tech Class of ‘71. In that senior year, Allen studied afternoons at the county school district’s adult education center, taking nursing prep courses. She wound up becoming a registered nurse, a field she continued in until retiring in 2013.

The Class of ‘71 has reunited every five years, and schedules informal get-togethers in between. “It’s still a pretty tight-knit group,” Marco said.

Like the ‘71 grads at Garfield, Honey Creek and Wiley, those at Gerstmeyer appreciate the smaller size of their alma maters.

“I think you got to know more people, and I think you had a better chance of

from Wiley to share their ideas for the consolidated school's name, school colors and other details that year.

"It was exciting to be part of those meetings to become a new school," Bennett said on a Zoom call last month with Wilkerson and another '71 classmate Jeanne (Allen) Endress. "But I was glad to have been graduated from Honey Creek."

Bennett, Wilkerson and Endress all believe they benefitted from Honey Creek's small-school atmosphere. All three went into education for some or all of their working careers. Bennett recalls his golf coach, Glen Ankney's "positive influence." Endress laughed at the memory of making a leather skirt in home economics teacher Marion Duvall's class that year. Earlier in her Honey Creek years, Endress had to team up with an older student in a Y-Teens skit.

"I was always quiet, and that really pulled me out of that shell," she said.

"So there's that family tie," he said.

As he and '71 classmates Martha (Swearingen) Nicosia and Gretchen (Turner) Baysinger sat on a picnic table, reflecting on their place in the school's history, each cited their school's size, with a graduating class of 300-plus, as an asset.

"You get to know the vast majority of your classmates and your teachers," Butts said.

Those experiences for Baysinger included her social dance club, where she learned to rumba and waltz. "It's something you're going to use for the rest of your life," she said.

Nicosia recalled reading Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel "The Jungle" in her Garfield humanities class. "That book affected me so much, and I've read it three times since then," Nicosia said.

If not for that opportunity from her humanities teacher, "I would've never

getting in some of the organizations," Allen said.

And, Gerstmeyer's main building was deteriorating by the 1970s.

"She was tired," Marco said of the structure. "Beautiful architecture. I guess everything has its time."

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Remembering neighborhood feel: Fifty years ago, members of Garfield High School's final graduating class picked up their diplomas. Students at the school at 12th Street and Maple Avenue typically at lunch at nearby eateries. A few members of the Class of '71 gathered at The Meadows this spring, including (from left) Martha (Swearingen) Nicosia, Bill Doan, Dave

“Personal relationships and friendships mean a lot,” Endress added.

The smallness of the school helped connect students with classmates and teachers.

“There was room for everybody,” Wilkerson said.

Lifelong influences

Wiley’s Class of ‘71 closed out a history dating back to 1863, when it opened as Terre Haute High School. After relocations, it was renamed in honor of the school’s second principal, William H. Wiley, in 1906. Wiley High stood on the same property now occupied by the Vigo County Public Library, whose grounds feature a Wiley memorial plaza.

In 1970-71, Wiley was showing its age, but its final class “really wanted to go out with a bang,” said Ann (Siebenmorgen) Bartley.

Wiley held a special place in her life, beyond books

read that book in a million years,” Nicosia said.

Later, Nicosia entered a career in management with Sony that took her to Georgia, Illinois, New York, Toronto and Los Angeles before returning to the Wabash Valley in retirement. Baysinger earned a track scholarship at Indiana State University, became a school teacher and then a UPS driver. Butts’ study of political science gave him a short term in politics, followed by a career in Christian ministry and prayer leadership.

Another ‘71 Garfield grad, Susan Mardis, also entered education in a career in Vigo County schools that lasted 45 years.

One of her pivotal moments as a Purple Eagle came when she tried out for the school’s choral group, the Trouveres. She didn’t get chosen as a sophomore. “I was crushed,” Mardis recalled.

But, a music teacher helped her learn the

Butts, Carol (Dunbar) Crain and Gretchen (Turner) Baysinger.

Tribune-Star/Mark Bennett



In history’s rearview mirror: A photographer for Honey Creek High School’s “Spirit” yearbook captured this picture of students leaving school during the final 1970-71 year.

Courtesy Vigo County Educational Heritage Association



Musical memory: This Wiley High School marching band uniform was donated to the Vigo

and the Red Streaks marching band. Her father (Class of '38) and mother (Class of '41) met there.

“Their speech teacher set them up on a blind date,” Bartley explained. “And if it hadn’t been for him, I wouldn’t be here.”

Bartley told stories over coffee with '71 classmates Pam Schalburg, Jim Jeffers, Autumn (Stillman) Standley and Gary Featherston. The five leafed through their last yearbook, recalling teachers, pep sessions, attire like “cords,” pranks such as painting W’s on archrival Garfield’s doors and singing an impromptu rendition of the school fight song.

“There was a lot of rivalry,” Featherston said.

“And there’s still competition,” Barley added, even decades later.

They also reminisced about the hangouts nearby

group’s songs that year and coached her progress. She made the Trouveres as a junior, and got a standing ovation from her cohorts. By her senior year in 1971, Mardis sang a solo at a National Honor Society ceremony.

“That was the highlight of my high school career,” Mardis said. “I probably wouldn’t have made it in a big high school. Who knows?”

Prepared for life

Part of Gerstmeyer Technical High School’s legacy still stands, with its gymnasium — named for iconic Black Cats basketball coach Howard Sharpe — serving today as the Terre Haute Boys and Girls Club center at 13th and Locust Streets. The school opened in 1922 in the original Rose Polytechnic School.

County Educational Heritage Association Museum by Ann (Siebenmorgen) Bartley, a member of Wiley’s Class of 1971.

Tribune-Star/Mark Bennett



Fifty years ago: A few members of Wiley High School’s Class of 1971 — the last in the downtown Terre Haute schools history — gathered at a coffeeshop to reflect on that final school year. They included (from left) Gary Featherston, Ann (Siebenmorgen) Bartley, Autumn (Stillman) Standley, Jim Jeffers and Pam (Potts) Schalburg.

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