

The Del Rio School System and North Heights Elementary School

In 1890, population growth in the community of Del Rio prompted the creation of an independent school district (ISD). “This meant that an elected school board would oversee the district and collect taxes for its maintenance apart from city and county government.” With the need to do something about the persistent problem, voters took action in the summer of 1890 by filing an application to the County Judge of Val Verde to submit a vote to the people in regard of incorporating “a territory embraced in said boundaries for free school purposes only” (Braudaway 128).

The lower grades of the schools were very crowded during those years. Some schools were so overcrowded and overwhelmingly too much for just one teacher that grades were often combined in one room to a teacher and in some instances, students had to be combined into other schools so as to relieve that teacher of the ‘overflow’. The Hill School, as North Heights was commonly known to the townspeople for its location, served this purpose at one time aside from serving the children that lived in the northern part of town. The Del Rio school system was facing the need for rapid expansion of its facilities. The number of pupils was increasing each year and the town was increasing in population as well (Braudaway 98).

North Heights was formerly known as the Hill Elementary School and was built on the northern part of Del Rio across the railroad tracks. In March 1908, the school board purchased land for North Heights. The cost: \$400. The construction of the building, which was to replace a small one-room frame building and to serve the families living in the north side of Del Rio, was \$11,250. and was constructed by the Berkner Brothers of Uvalde, TX. The building stood

on the 500 block of Main Street. It occupied two whole city blocks and was the first north side school. It faced east and is currently standing, though it has faced a great deal of changes since it was first built (Barnes & Moore 74).

Leslie Schmidt, a former student at North Heights recalls what it was like back then.

“I went to North Heights in 1927 at the age of five. It was a six room two-story building. The grades that were taught there were from first grade to sixth grade. There was no segregation there [as there had been in previous years at the other schools]. There were 75% Anglo and 25% Hispanic no blacks. We had no school buses nor lunch room. We got a one hour lunch break and everyone would go home and eat and come back to resume classes for the rest of the day. The subjects that were taught there were spelling, for reading we read Baby Ray books...we had arithmetic: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. We were also taught music; each classroom had a piano and the music teacher would go to every classroom and teach us a song and we all sang. We sang rounds. We were divided into different groups and each group was assigned to sing a different part of the song and we would all sing our parts at the same time and the key was to sing the part you were assigned to and not sing what the other group was singing. It was like mental training for listening and singing. We had recess two times a day- in the morning and in the afternoon. The boys and the girls had different playgrounds located at the east and west side of the school. First through third grade played on the slide, swings, and sandboxes. Fifth and sixth graders and sometimes fourth graders played volleyball and baseball [which was a very popular sport back then]” (Schmidt, interview).

In the years from 1911 to 1924, Del Rio had a great improvement in its school system.

They had come a long way from receiving accreditation, increasing faculty, establishing vocational developments, organization of athletic departments, publishing school manuals, to requiring higher qualifications for teachers. The Del Rio school system was facing several problems in those years. The Del Rio public schools were just three buildings then. There was the Central Building with eight teachers and held grades first through seventh, the north side building (North Heights) with one and grades first through fifth and the Colored school with one. In a letter the editor [W.K. Jones] clearly states some of these problems: “...sadly [we] need

more equipment, more school building, more teaching force, and longer terms. Our town is growing in population and wealth and our schools must keep apace" (Barnett & Moore 64).

In 1971, Del Rio's two districts, DRISD and San Felipe ISD were consolidated. The kids from both sides of town had to get used to the changes of attending new schools, Hispanic kids and Anglo kids mixed in the same classrooms. They adjusted to their new teammates, who had once been opponents on the playing field. But in the end it all worked out. Now known as the San Felipe Del Rio Consolidated Independent School District, the district contains all of the old schools including North Heights Elementary (old newspaper The Del Rio Daily News Mar 5, 1906).

Today, North Heights is a whole lot different than what it used to be since Mr. Schmidt's school days. The grades taught now are from kindergarten to fifth grade. The kindergarten was added about five years ago and it is housed on buildings that used to serve first graders. It is located by the front of the school. Buildings have been added through the years, thereby accommodating the school's needs. The buildings that have been added since Mr. Schmidt's time would be the ones that are now the kindergarten, the cafeteria, two boys and girls bathrooms (located at the east and west side of the main building) and the rooms along 10th Street that house fourth and fifth grade. Most recently, two new buildings were added in front of the fourth grade classrooms. They are the art room and the music room. The school contains a patio and an auditorium, which was built during Mr. Schmidt's school days and is frequently used when the kids are given recognition on their academic performances and attendance. These two are considered important and historic features of the school since they are pretty much as old as the school itself along with a fire escape on the west side of the main building. It is one of two that still remains today.

Things have pretty much remained the same since the time I attended school there myself. Some of the new changes I encountered were new staff members as well as teachers and the kindergarten. In an interview with Assistant Principal Denise Reyes, the following was said:

“The school curriculum has changed. It has become much more rigorous...what you might have learned in the fourth grade is now being taught at the second grade. The school is trying to keep up with State regulations and was preparing the students for success. It is getting harder...more advanced. The school keeps busy after school hours. There is a lot of tutorials going on. We have kids that stay and hang out as well as other kids in the neighborhood that come and play basketball. Since the school is in the neighborhood it provides kids with a playground [and safety] and they are less likely to get into trouble” (Reyes, interview).

There have been rumors that the school might get torn down someday because it is very old, perhaps the oldest school building in the district. The future of it is still pretty much uncertain. In an interview with Mike Salinas, director of operations/facilities/CATE for the San Felipe Del Rio CISD said:

“For the next two years the school will remain where it’s at. There is a plan for the 2005-2006 school years that the sixth grade will be at the San Felipe seventh grade campus and the sixth grade (known as Marion Russell Middle School) campus will be vacant. The kids from North Heights will be moving to the sixth grade facility but not until it is renovated to be suitable for elementary level. No decisions have been made yet as to whether there will be a name change to the San Felipe Middle School to Marion Russell Middle School. When the moving of the schools has taken place, the North Heights building will be vacant. No one knows what will happen to it. Nothing really can be done about it. It cannot be renovated because on the upcoming school bond for the renovation of the old San Felipe seventh grade campus (which is for an estimated \$34 million dollars), none of it will go to North Heights. The reason for it is because of the age of the school and the size of the site. It is a landlocked. It cannot be expanded...the school is too small. It does not meet the state’s requirements of an elementary school. The standard amount of students that an elementary should have is between 700 to 800. North Heights has half of that. The current number is 434” (Salinas, interview).

The school is in service from now until the end of the school year (May 2004). The little things that have been done to it are just basically to maintain it and keep it suitable for the children currently attending it. It will still be in service for the next two years but after that its future is unknown.

Bibliography

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old newspaper--- The Del Rio Daily News Vol. 1 No. 124 Del Rio, Tx. March 5, 1906