RSF School: A Rich History Of The Best In Education

By Jan Secrist

The tiny one-room schoolhouse stood in a dusty country corner surrounded by ribbons of hills and meadows. The rooftop bell clanged a cheerful good morning to the 10 students, most of whom walked to school from nearby homesteads. Others, living further away, clip-clopped their way by horse and buggy. The pupils studied at wooden desks, played recess games of tag and run sheep run, and scooped drinking water from a blue-enameled bucket. Tall windows let in the sunlight, and a pot-bellied stove took the chill out of blustery winter days.

The wood-framed schoolhouse, named the Aliso Canyon School, was built in 1905 by Ferdinand Coehn, Theodore Fidero and their neighbors in the northeast section of what would later become Rancho Santa Fe. This hardy group also constructed a small cabin nearby for Mrs. Merkan, the first pioneer-minded teacher to make the weekly trek from San Diego.

Although it may not have been realized at the time, the fledgling school was quietly establishing the tradition that would become its trademark—a promise to present and future students of progressive leadership, dedicated staff and whole-hearted community support.

breezeways echoed with happy shouts as the youngsters scampered out to daily recess games.

For the next two decades school life was relatively stable. The townspeople, busy creating their historic covenant and selling land for the princely sum of $100 an acre, never wavered in their comitment to keep the school a vital part of the community.

The students continued to walk, bike or ride horses to school, and flourished in their unique and safe environment. Rancho Santa Fe's appealing lifestyle was being discovered, however, and this growth was soon reflected in the school numbers. In 1947 Principal Ellen Ross, one of the two teachers, shared 47 students in grades K-6. By the mid 1950s the school enrollment had more than doubled to 110 youngsters, and once again the grade school walls were bursting at the seams.

The third and final school site was chosen on La Granada between El Fuego and Avenida de Acacias, and the new school, grown to seven classrooms on 10.3 acres, was completed in 1955. Students felt right at home in the traditional building and reveled in the enlarged playground space.

One balmy spring evening in 1958 the Rancho Santa Fe School Board

pledges, donations and memberships, the library was built next to the school, complete with a cozy Children's Room. Rancho Santa Fe graudates have fond memories of story hours, puppet shows, special films and a mind-jostling selection of children's books.

No time to rest on well-earned laurels, however! By 1968 the school was bulging again. This time the temporary solution was to put a third grade class at the fire station.

The youngsters waited eagerly as the upstairs room was carpeted, the pool table discretely covered with plywood, and small desks were placed around the room. The students were the envy of their friends as they marched proudly up the hill to share quarters with Fire Chief Jim Fox, his welcoming firemen and shiny fire engines.

The permanent solution, of course, was to add more classrooms. As this topic was being mulled over, there was also some heartfelt discussion about having the seventh and eighth graders remain in Rancho Santa Fe for junior high.

From the earliest rural school days until 1936, the seventh to 12th grade students had been bused east over the windy, bumpy road to Escondido. For the next 20 years they were bused

decided their beautiful new school deserved school colors and an official mascot. The vote was a landslide: Red, white and blue became the school colors, and the Eagle—wings up, head outstretched—was chosen as mascot. Student dictionaries described the eagle as known for strength, gracefulness, keenness of vision and powers of flight—a fitting symbol indeed!

Before anyone had time to take a deep breath, a group of parents plunked a new proposal on the school board table: How about a gymnasium? The idea was pounced on with enthusiasm.

Planned by the new Rancho Youth Board, with 20 original members guaranteeing loans of $10,000 each, the gymnasium began to rise on school district property next to the Middle School. It was then dedicated to the school district, which joined with Rancho Youth to fund completion of the walls in 1975. Many a young athlete continues to hone athletic muscles by tiptoeing across balance beams, shooting baskets and spiking volleyballs.

Rancho Santa Fe, with a current population of 4,400, has grown hand-in-hand with the school and continues to offer enthusiastic support. A glance at the agendas of village organizations—the

arrived for the start of the 1992 school year, the two-story Spanish-style building reminded them of the contributions of those who have gone before. The 10 **modern classrooms, brightly lit art studio, well-appointed computer/science lab and special education classroom are fulfilling the long-standing promise for both the present and the future.**

The Rancho Santa Fe School continues to meet the increasing academic challenges facing young people today. Student test scores remain exceptionally high on both state and national achievement tests. The school often receives recognition and top honors for student accomplishments and achievements. Dr. Rowe's visionary upgrades of every academic program and the eagerness of the staff to build on student needs and successes earn high marks at local, county and state levels.

It's clear that a committed and effective school board, a dedicated school staff and the remarkably supportive community are a winning combination. The continuing goals of extraordinary guidance, individual encouragement and ongoing pursuit of excellence give every young eaglet a chance to soar at the Ranch Santa Fe School.

country schoolhouse was closed and children attended classes in the village of Rancho Santa Fe. They studied in the old toy shop, now an art gallery on Paseo Delicias, watching as the adobe walls and tile roof of their new two-room schoolhouse took shape across the road. In June of 1924, Ivy Fidero Laughter, the first graduate, distinctly remembers wearing a fancy lace dress borrowed from her sister and receiving the gift of a picture from the school architect, Lilian Rice.

The structure may have changed but the traditions remained the same. The new school quickly became the social focus of the community, blossoming from the schoolhouse by day to concert hall, dance pavilion, super club or garden exhibition room on evenings and weekends. The name of Aliso Canyon School, a carry-over from its rural beginnings, was changed in 1927 when the school was officially named the Rancho Santa Fe School, complete with its own school district.

Growing pains for the village began to come in waves. By 1931 there were 45 families in Rancho Santa Fe and the student population was stretching the school walls. A larger schoolhouse was constructed two blocks away on Avenida de Acacias, where the Association offices are currently located. The 35-40 students shared two teachers as they recited their lessons in the bright, sunlit rooms. The long covered

Coronado sixth grade teacher named Roger Rowe. Superintendent Buzz Baker said later: "I swiped Roger from Coronado to replace me as fifth grade teacher. It was probably one of the greatest moves I've ever made in my life!" The Rancho Santa Fe School had launched its flight into future record books.

Roger Rowe, quickly known for his ever-cheerful manner and boundless enthusiasm, taught his first class of 23 students in the seven-room school. The town experienced another growth surge soon after, however, and Mr. Rowe moved with his fifth graders back to the Association building. By 1961 a second wing with four new rooms had sprouted in the La Granada grounds, and two more exciting goals were reached: Roger Rowe became teaching principal, and the entire student body of 220 students, grades K-6, was together under the same tiled roof.

The sleepy school days were but a hazy memory now as the school found itself on a fast-paced schedule of growth and new challenges. Roger Rowe was promoted to superintendent of the Rancho Santa Fe School District in 1964, just as the community was recognizing the need for a library.

Then-board President Neil Randol and Mr. Rowe led the motion to sell one-third of an acre of school land to the Library Guild for the magnificent fee of $1. Financed completely by

Dieguito. Since 1955 the seventh and eighth graders had been attending school in Solana Beach. It was both timely and financially prudent to have K-8 in one location—but where to put them?

Rancho Santa Fe residents voted yes on construction bonds in December 1969 for the addition called the Middle School. Six months later the voters approved the return of the seventh and eighth grades, and in two years, in September of 1971, the Middle School opened with great fanfare. The entire town celebrated the first time all nine grades (K-8) were together under one sprawling roof.

Students eagerly investigated their new facility. They found small, comfortable instructional areas as well as large, airy classrooms and an extensive school library-media center. They were soon creating bubbly experiments in the science lab, polishing verbal skills in the language arts center and mastering algebra in the math lab.

Some young people discovered a budding love for acting on the wide new stage, while others preferred the quiet of the reading court and art patio. The outside amphitheater remains a favorite spot for school programs, and applause reverberates as heartily for the hesitant words of a lisping kindergartner as for the polished prose of a sophisticated eighth grade orator.

The student body

department, the Historical Society, the Santa Fe Irrigation District, the Rotary Club, the library, the Garden Club, the Community Foundation and the RSF National Bank—shows a remarkable range of school-supported activities.

From musical shows to public-speaking contests, from computers to creative science projects, from leadership camp to school fund-raisers, the townspeople back up every interest. The students spend their formative years in a community-wide atmosphere of caring, respect and cooperation, tasting firsthand their rewards of service to others.

Therein lies the success of this organization. Every student has ample opportunity to feel the heartbeat of the school: Dr. Rowe's zest for fair play, good citizenship and the highest of academic standards; a caring, dedicated staff; and an army of more than 200 volunteers from the ranks of parents and community members. The first grade math books claim that two plus two makes four...but in their hearts these young people learn early that in this community two plus two often makes five, or seven, or 10, for the energy radiating around the campus has an explosive effect.

And the remarkable story continues...in March 1991 the residents of Rancho Santa Fe overwhelmingly approved a bond measure for a stunning addition to the school. As the 552 students

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Happy Rancho Days 1994: September 22-25

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