

The Oak Valley School

By Kathy Hunter

There are still a few people around who remember the one-room "Oak Valley" schoolhouse in Kinnickinnic, one of seven in the Township. Standing at the southeast corner of the intersection of County Roads N and SS, what became known as the Oak Valley school operated from about 1868 until it was closed in 1952. But few know that this school district originated even earlier and at a different location.

A book containing original, hand-written school district records, was recently discovered on Kinnickinnic property first developed by Christain Bonnes, one of a group of Prussian immigrants who arrived in this area in 1852. This book records the first meeting of "School District No. 5 in the Towns of Warren and Malone", Malone being the earlier name for Kinnickinnic Township.

On May 4, 1861, a group of residents met (location not recorded) and chose officers and a schoolhouse site: the northeast quarter of the northeast quarter of section six in Town 28 Range 18. That describes a 40-acre parcel in the Town of Kinnickinnic on the WEST side of that intersection and probably north of County Road N. The parcel is currently owned by Mike Delander.

The tax roll for 1861 listed a Sylvester Walker as owner of that parcel, having received the original land patent from the government in 1855. In 1862, however, ownership was listed as "unknown". By 1863, Seth Colbeth, who had arrived in Warren Township some 10 years earlier, had acquired the parcel, and it remained in the Colbeth family for the next several years.

Seth Colbeth was elected clerk at that May 1861 meeting. Mathias Ross, who lived about a mile south on what is now County Road SS, was chosen director, and W.D. Hartwell, treasurer. Jne. (sic) Hartwell chaired the meeting. Residents voted to raise \$100 to build their school and hire a teacher, with Seth authorized to buy the necessary materials. The electors specified that a "female teacher" be engaged to teach a three-month summer session. A woman named Johnson was subsequently hired at \$16 per month.

On Oct. 29, electors gathered again for their first annual meeting, chaired by Charles Colbeth, the adult son of Seth. They decided to forego a winter school session but have four months of classes beginning May 1.

It was agreed to raise an additional \$75, with 60 percent apportioned to residents of Malone (Kinnickinnic) and 40 percent to Warren, based on the taxable property of the school district lying within each township.

Like Sylvester Walker, the Hartwells soon disappeared from the record, but the Colbeth and Ross families, along with the Bonnes family, dominated the elected positions during the early years of what became known as the Oak Valley school.

By March of 1862, the treasurer's office was vacant, and Christian Bonnes was appointed to fill in until the next annual meeting on Sept. 29. At that time, Bonnes was elected clerk, with Seth Colbeth taking over the treasurer's post. Mathias Ross chaired the meeting.

Minutes are unclear as to the specific responsibilities of the annual meeting chairman. No "president" of the board is ever mentioned, but sometimes the minutes say the meeting chairman was also elected a "director" for a three-year term.

The records of the next few years tell an orderly story of contracting with teachers, soliciting bids to supply firewood, and paying local residents for work on their school, such as \$9 to Dennis Mahoney for plastering and banking (piling straw or other insulating material against the building). A stove and pipes were purchased for \$18. A blackboard cost \$2, and a lock \$1. Chalk and a broom came to sixty cents. The state supplied a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, but the district had to pay \$3 freight to get it.

Trying to avoid the busiest farming seasons, the rural community separately authorized summer and winter sessions for three or four months each. Summer session usually began in mid-May and winter session in early November.

At least eleven different teachers were employed in the six years recorded in this book. Most, but not all, were women. By the mid-1860s, wages had risen to between \$26 and \$30 per month. Teachers were awarded one-year

licenses by the state after passing examinations in orthography (spelling), orthoepy (pronunciation), reading, mental arithmetic, written arithmetic, geography, history, grammar, and penmanship.

Another book from that era, a student attendance record, gave rise to the mistaken assumption that Oak Valley classes did not begin until May 1868. The "Teachers' Daily Register" shows Jennie Jewell welcoming 26 students. Six more started in June or July. Classes were held Monday through Friday and every other Saturday. Saturday classes later were largely eliminated.

The "Teachers' Daily Register" was designed to record each student's attendance both morning and afternoon. The book's author wrote, "These (twice daily) spaces are large enough to record in them the number of minutes each pupil is tardy...This Register is specially designed to remedy this greatest of evils in our Schools, by showing the time even to a minute that any Pupil is absent from School. Parents not unfrequently become dissatisfied with their Schools, because their children do not make more rapid progress in their studies. Might they not find the true reason by consulting the Record of Attendance? (N)o inconsiderable part of the funds so generously appropriated to school purposes, is absolutely thrown away in consequence of the Irregular Attendance of Pupils."

The last session recorded in this particular register, Nov. 15, 1875 to April 4, 1876, showed Joseph Johnston instructing 54 students, although average daily attendance was much less. The age difference in the one-room building ranged from a handful of five to seven-year-olds up to three boys and a girl age twenty. However, three of those four oldest came only a day or two.

Christmas fell on Saturday that year, and students had Thursday and Friday off. It was back to school on Monday.

Family names included Bonnes, Keefe, O'Keefe, Ryan, Ross, Welsh or Welch, O'Brien, Colbeth, Hutton, Mahoney, Smith, Wanner, Splann, Switzer, Dorigan, Wilson, Shasby, Lenehan, Haddow, Cashman, and Galvin.

For the sixth time, the Oak Valley community assembled for their annual meeting. Convening at the school on Sept. 24, 1866, they voted unanimously "that the schoolhouse be moved on

the one acre on the south side of the stage road (now County N). . ."

Ten years later, the oldest known plat book locates the school at the southeast corner of what are now County Roads N and SS.

However, there is a discrepancy between the legal description of that site and what was recorded in the 1866 minutes. The minutes point to a parcel directly west of the original site. Both that parcel and the southeast land were owned by Christian Bonnes. Was the school moved twice? Or was it decided after the annual meeting that the southeast corner was preferable?

A search of St. Croix County land records did not reveal any transfer of ownership to the school district for any of the locations. It is likely the land owners simply agreed to having the school on their property without registering a formal transfer.

No reason was recorded for the move. In 1866, Seth Colbeth's two sons were adults, though he still had two daughters in school. On the other hand, Christian Bonnes' oldest son was just reaching school age. It is possible that had something to do with moving the school.

Kathy Hunter is a resident of Kinnickinnic Township. She is the Great-great granddaughter of Christian Bonnes.

Editors Note-

This map from "Remembering Rural Schools of St. Croix County" shows the locations of the seven rural schools in Kinnickinnic Township. More information about our rural schools can be found in this book (available at local libraries)

