

## *Wheeler School*

*By Martha Ruth Milton Martin*

*(There are no corrections to punctuation, grammar or spelling.)*

*The first schoolhouse in Wheeler may have been built before the Civil War. The Gardner family, who lived just east of where later Wheeler was located, built a small building in which to give their children some training in formal education. Older family members volunteered their time to teach the younger ones. Neighbors who lived in the vicinity, also sent their children for the two or three month term. With the completion of the M. and O. Railroad, more people moved into the valley near the depot and formed a community called Five-Mile Crossing. The residents built a one room unpainted building on the site of the present home of Mr. and Mrs. E.C. Floyd. The location was probably chosen because it was near a stream of water, and water for the school could be brought easily from Osborne Creek. (behind the present home of Charles and Linda Martin) The benches and other furnishings in the school were crude home made seats and a table.*

*About the time that Prentiss County was formed from a part of Tishomingo, a new and larger school house was built on the lot of the present Methodist Church. This building had more comfortable furnishings than that of the older structure and until about 1897 was used also for church services. By the 1898 the three churches had built structures for themselves, and the community had grown to the extent the school house was much too small. Citizens decided to build a much larger one and secured a suitable lot where the present gym is now located. (The 'present gym' refers to the gym that was torn down in 1996) The two-story four classroom building was barely completed before it was discovered that it was too small. One of the principals who served during these years was Ollie Wallace, who introduced basket ball into the school and coached the first team but who also insisted that all students meet high academic standards. When in 1910 she married R.E.L.*

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*Sutherland the county superintendent of education, Jack Brown became the principal. Again it was necessary to add more teachers and more subjects. Among the teachers were Herman McDonald, Leona Smith, Lora Rampley, and a very talented music teacher Connie Rampley Franks. When Professor Billingsley became head of the school, it became necessary to add more teachers again. In 1913, the school building was completely destroyed by fire.*

*A group of little boys who had just begun school rejoiced because they thought the burning of the building meant no more school. Roy Elder, one of the little lads remembered how short lived their joy was. The school resumed classes immediately in a vacant dwelling on the site of Ellis and Alma Wilson's present home.*

*The new school building was erected on the site of the burned one. It was of classic design big, square two-story, with many windows. Downstairs were four commodious classrooms for the grammar school. The auditorium and two big classrooms upstairs were deemed sufficient to take care of the high school which included only the ninth and tenth grades. Among the teachers during this era were William Taylor, Wesley Downs, Herman McDonald, Clarence Milton and his sisters Mable and Hazel Milton, Ruth Jones, Claud Grisham, Rosa Lee White, and Sallie Kilpatrick, (the beloved "Miss Killy")*

*The community of Wheeler grew very fast in the first two decades of the new century and again the patrons saw the need for more classroom space. During this period Sammie Bennett, Jewel Elder, Alonzo Skelton, Bash LeCroy, Ora Prichard, Martin Hadden, and Edith Lay were members of the faculty. A small separate music room had been constructed probably at the time the school house was built but*

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*there was no musical instrument in it. Miss Lay brought her own piano and placed with there for as long as she taught music.*

*When J. Kirk Morgan became superintendent a movement was begun to add more grades and to relieve the overcrowded conditions by adding more classrooms. Lillian Keeton, Eugene Ulaters, Ruby and Jennie Ellen Houck, Ruth Spain were added to the faculty. In the 1923-24 session Jack Tubb became superintendent and in 1925 the first students graduated twelfth grade in Wheeler. Agriculture and home economics became a part of the curriculum and a vocational building was erected south of the main building. A home for the agriculture teacher was built across the road from the school.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Reynold were the first teachers of the vocational subjects in Wheeler and the first to live in the new home. Wiley Richards joined the faculty as coach. Another talented music teacher Willie Tapp was teaching with a school owned piano, Wheeler began to excel in academics, basket ball, and other extra-curricula activities. When Mr. Tubb resigned in 1926, he took Miss Tapp with him as his wife. J.B. Wheeler was selected to replace Mr. Tubb. Fred Leech took over the duties of coach. Other faculty members included J.D. Wheeler, Sue Golding, Mrs. McDougal, Christine Oakley, Faye Davis, Golden Fanning, Pansy Rutledge, Sallie Kilpatrick, Ruby and Jennie Ellen Houck, and Gladys Rugg Davis. When Fred Leech left to coach at Thrasher, Harrison Arnold was selected as the Wheeler coach. At the end of the 28-29 term, J. B. Wheeler resigned to accept a position in Sandersville and took with him Christine Oakley as his wife. J. O. Snowden, another handsome bachelor, was chosen to head Wheeler School. New faculty members included Dexter Jumper, Martha Ruth Milton, Ripple Cates, Mildred Oakley, Virginia Franks, Robert Lee Billingsley, Sue Helen Walker and Homer Parker.*

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*In 1932, Mr. Snowden resigned and R.E.L. Sutherland was elected to the position of superintendent. Mississippi at that time still operated under the spoils system, a system by which all elected officials from supervisor to governor dismissed those 'who did not vote right.'*

*Mr. Sutherland, who was president of M.S.U. became a victim of the spoils system in 1932. He moved back to his home in Wheeler and accepted the position as superintendent of the school. In addition to faculty members already teaching, new members included J.M. LeCroy, Rubye Haynie, Mable Cunningham, Pauline Bryan, Lurline Jones (who replaced Miss Kilpatrick when she retired), Gladys Milton. (When Miss Milton retired there six years later she had the longest tenure of any teacher in the Wheeler School. For thirty-two years she had taught the primary grade.) Also joining the faculty during the early thirties were Mrs. R.E.L. Sutherland, Bonnie Grisham, Charlotte Bryan, Annie Mae Scoggins, Clyde Hill, Gordon Bennett, George Oakley, Kathryn Funk, Bess Martin, Homer Parker, Virginia Harris.*

*When Mr. Sutherland left Wheeler to become president of Pearl River Junior College, D.C. Hollis was selected as superintendent of Wheeler School. Mrs. Hollis joined the faculty as home economics teacher. Fred Houston was the next superintendent but served only a short time before he was called into active duty in the army. (He was a reserve army officer)*

*The World War II years were drawing near. Wheeler School was over-crowded, the play grounds were too small, and once again basket ball was being played on an out door court. The first gym had burned during the depth of the depression and had not been replaced. Federal and state funds were available for the building programs at this time. Mr. Weatherford from Petal, Mississippi, was chosen as the man to replace Mr. Houston. He had a certain expertise in handling the complexities of securing funds, and used his skills to secure money for*

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*building a new brick school building for Wheeler. The new school was located on a spacious lot between the teacher's home and the Exchange. The south part of the new building would house the high school with the part taking care of the grammar school. A large auditorium was designed to double as an auditorium and study hall. Set farther back on the south side was a separate vocation building. On the north was the lunch room. The old school building was dismantled and rebuilt as a gymnasium. (This gym is still in use.) (Note: This gym was torn down in 1996.)*

*Mr. John Thompson followed Mr. Weatherford as superintendent. While Mr. Thompson was superintendent his son-in-law Jamie Whitten was first elected to the U.S. Congress. After two years in Wheeler, Mr. Thompson retire, and Mildon Pardue became head of the school. A few mothes later, he accepted another job, and Taylor Smith was chosen to succeed him. Louree Jones, Helen Pippem, Herbert Grisham, Josephine Epting joined the faculty. When Mr. Smith resigned, the trustees of Wheeler chose a classroom teacher to take his place. Martha Ruth Martin was not only the firs Wheeler classroom teacher to be elevated to the position but she was the also the first woman in this area to head a public high school. At this time Esta Lee Gordon, Margie Crawford, Christine Wheeler, Cecil Gooch, Randle Williamson, Ellen Bryson, Bervil Elder, and Ruth Hill taught in the school. Grace Milton Keeton had joined the faculty the year before, making the sixth Milton to teach in Wheeler; Clarence Milton, Amble and Hazel Milton, Gladys Milton, Martha Ruth Milton Martin, and Grace Milton Keeton.*

*When Fred Houston returned from was, Martha Ruth Martin accepted a position in the English department at Baldwin, and Mr. Houston resumed the job as superintendent of Wheeler. In 1947, he was elected chancery clerk of Prentiss County and Harold Smith replaced his as head of Wheeler School. Iroy Mae Smith, William Fraser, and*

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*Ruby Moore joined the faculty. When Mr. Smith left, Richard Whaling was elected as superintendent. Clyde Hill also taught in the 1940-1941 was principal. In 1951, Clyde Hill replaced Mr. Whaling. While Mr. Hill was serving, Prentiss County adopted the county-unit system under which the county superintendent of education became the superintendent of all the county schools. The head of teaching individual schools thereafter was called principal. In the late fifties Richard Arnold succeeded his father as coach. Other teachers included Homer and Willie Frances Gury, Earl Chisholm, Leola Garner, William Fraser, Mrs. Lake Rhett,*

*Wheeler first gained statewide recognition when a basketball team that practiced on an out door court captured the state championship title in 1925 and went on to attract national attention in the tournament in Chicago. When the school repeated this feat two more times in the next four years, Wheeler had earned a lasting reputation in basketball. Through the ensuing years the school has lived up to this honor by consistently producing good teams. More than thirty times Wheeler has sent outstanding teams to the state tournaments.*

*The first state championship team was coached by Wiley Richardson. The 1925 team, which won the honor, was composed of Shelton Duncan, Robert Anderson, Hughery Holliday, Grady Holliday, Booker Martin, Clarence Gardner, and Gury Martin. In 1926, Herman Duncan was added to the team, and again under the coaching of Wiley Richardson won the state title. When Mr. Richardson left Wheeler after the 1926 term, he was succeeded by Fed Leech. Wheeler fans had become so enthusiastic about basketball that they made plans to build an indoor court. The gymnasium, which was constructed on the site of the present vocational building, was a barn like structure; but it had a beautiful*

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hardwood floor and had the distinction of being the first gym in Prentiss County. It was ready for use when the young Harrison Arnold took Fred Leech's place to begin one of the most brilliant careers of any high school coach. In his twenty-seven years as coach, he carried teams sixteen times to the state tournaments. He earned for himself the title 'Dean of High School Basketball coaches.' Mr. Arnold's first state championship team was the 1929 one. It was composed of Talmadge Steele, Cecil Graham, Devoy Graham, Bill Strange and Bonner Arnold. This team also rated high in the national competition in Chicago. Some of the outstanding teams that Mr. Arnold Coached in the thirties and forties did not win state titles but they placed near the top in the finals and many of the individual players were outstanding. Colleges began to offer scholarships to them. Among these stars were Googe Prather, Leslie Steele, Ray Ricks, Walter Martin, Arliss Ricks, Taylor Smith, Alton Ricks, Randall Smith, Cecil Gooch, Glen Isbell, Wallace Gooch, Jimmy Arnold, Richard Arnold, Lawrence Burns, Curtis Chisholm, Bill Pressly. (Bill's career as a player ended after his junior year in high school when he had a leg amputated, but he went on to coach and produced a team at New Site that won state championship.)

In 1955, Mr. Arnold's team captured the state title again for Wheeler. This fast moving team was composed of L. J. and M. C. Saylor (twins), Jerry Keeton, Dan Leech, Richard Hill, backed up by Deryl and Dean Saylor, Donald Hutchins, Hayden Thompson, Jimmy Glover, and Sammy Richey.

Richard Arnold was chosen to take his father's place to carry on the Arnold Wheeler tradition. In 1959, Richard's team were Gramville Barron, Pete (Red) Dixon, Lynn Coats, Sam Lindsey, Kenneth Downs, Joy McCoy backed up by Gerald Thompson, Darrell Garrison, Morris Bryan, Rhett Eaton, with Joc Cochran as manager. Like his father,

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*Richard Arnold coached many good teams that did not win state titles but did place in state tournaments. In his seventeen years of coaching, he carried twelve teams to the state tournaments. He won his second state title in 1970.*

*This team consisted of Billy Wayne Lindsey, Billy Uard, Danny Arnold, Eddie Murphy, George Rowland, Bert Harper, Kerry Saylor, Ronald Ford, Charles Martin, and Keith Kelly.*

*Conwill Coggan became the coach after Mr. Arnold retired from coaching to give full time to being principal of the grammar school. In 1973 Sam Richey accepted the coaching position after Mr. Coggins took a job with the state. Like his predecessors, he has been remarkably successful. Coach Richey's 1980 team won the state title and in both 1981 and 1982, his Wheeler teams were runners-up in the state tournament. The state championship team of 1980 consisted of Mitch Garner, Terry Ballard, Tim Keesler, Bubba Miller, Kennedy Gamble, Jim Davis, Ronnie McCoy, and Ricky Chandler.*

*Although it has been the A teams that have won the widest recognition, the B teams and the pee-wee teams have also been well-coached by assistants or by the head coach himself. Basketball for girls has been a part of the Wheeler since before the twenties except for a few years when all high schools discontinued the program for girls. At times in the history, the boys' coach also coached the girls. At other times an assistant coach worked with the girls. Even though no girls' team from Wheeler has won a state title, the teams have been good. Since 1970, Mike Anderson has helped to carry on the Wheeler tradition by coaching and teaching physical education at the junior high school level.*

*Although Wheeler is the legendary 'basketball capital' of the state, it also has other deep-rooted legends. One such that persists is that it*

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*produced 'the brightest boys and the prettiest girls in the state.' Whether these are legends or truth, Wheeler has a proud history of graduating students who have become outstanding in such varied fields as medicine, nursing, law, engineering, mathematics, science, journalism, teaching, coaching, farming, commercial art, communications, ministry, music, business, and mechanical and technical areas.*

*Among those who have taught at Wheeler in the last twenty-five years are:*

*Mike Anderson, Wanda Anderson, Jack Arnold, Kathlyn Arnold, Richard, Sammie Barnett, Sharon Bostic, Callie Bruce, Barbara Bryan, Earl Chisholm, Mary Glenn Curlee, Elizabeth Epting, Virginia Cox, Ruth Carroll, Regina Enfinger, Gloria Fraser, Terry Fraser, Conwill Coggins, Birbly Frost, Flora Gardner, Leola Garner, Virlon Garrett, Peggy Gilley, Margaret Goddard, Homer Gury, Willie Frances Gury, James Hardy, Kathryn Hatcher, Barbara Kelly, Holmes Kiger, Nancy Kiger, Barbara Kohleim, Catherine Houston, Mary Jackson, Maxine Johnson, Elisha Jumper, Carolyn Lamber, Howard Long, Carolyn Lambert, Irene Little, Conie Lytal, Viola Miller, Judy Miller, Lunelle Miller, Gladys Milton, Maxine McAlpin, Ruby Moore, Tina Moore, Manada Murphy, Lonnie Murphy, Judy Murphy, Uwayne Parks, Ruth Palmertree, Ronnie Phillips, Bonnie Phillips, Essie Phillips, Dale Richey, Sam Richey, Billie Sue Ryan, Nelson Ryan, Walter Sartim, Joy Saylor, Mrs. Ulater Simon, Joyce Smith, Monte Smith, Undine Smith, Velma Strange, Donnie Simpson, Undine Simpson, Genie Pounds, Marie Taylor, Ocie Tucker, Wrynell Thompson, Snadra Walton, James Wilson, Virginia Wilson, Deninis Worley, Moiese Woodruff, Angela Via.*