

AUHS REMEMBRANCES, 1938-1955



Former principal and superintendent, Roy Gilstrap

Atascadero in 1938 was a small, rural, central California town, but was untypical of most other small towns. The community was formed following World War I as a planned development, the dream of E. G. Lewis, its founder. It started as a tent city as the new and future residents arrived and began building their dream homes on the newly subdivided rolling hills of the eastern slope of the California Coastal range. As this was a planned community, there was an extensive commercial area set aside for future development with wide, paved streets, curbs, gutters and sidewalks along with attractive streetlights south of Traffic Way and east of Highway 101 (now El Camino Real). Athletic fields, tennis courts, grass malls, sunken gardens, fountains and several public and private buildings of classic design were constructed bordering this area on the southeast and northeast. A large beautiful marble statue of three semi-clothed young women, anchored the west mall drive to the high school. It was said that Mr. Lewis purchased the statue at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904 for nearly \$30,000. However, the great depression severely affected

the community and forever changed its destiny and the dream of Mr. Lewis. Although it had been well planned, it had no strong economic base to continue its growth, as Lewis had had envisioned, during the difficult economic times of the 1930s. Consequently, its development remained dormant until World War II. In 1938, it probably had an estimated population of about 2,500.

The picturesque high school was located on a hill southwest of the main street (Highway 101) surrounded by sprawling lawns. The hill in front of the school was covered with lawn with a few large live oak trees and a tall white flag pole, which proudly welcomed all those who approached via the mall. The grounds were developed and lovingly maintained by Frank Koch, Superintendent of Grounds and Buildings, and his staff. The main classroom building was of classical design with Spanish Colonial influence. It had an elaborate clock tower on the south end and a beautiful library, with a wooden gothic ceiling supported on curved arch trusses, anchored the north end. The classroom building was connected to the auditorium/gymnasium by an ivy covered colonnade which continued around the auditorium on three sides. With a student population of around 250, it had the atmosphere of a small private school and was quite unlike the sprawling campus of today. Everyone knew each other on campus and reunions of friends and alumni from this era continue to this day. The school served the communities of Atascadero, Santa Margarita, Pozo and the farming area in the Carrizo Plains in eastern San Luis Obispo County as it does today.

Following are some of my recollections regarding the development and growth of the high school beginning in the fall of 1938 when my father, Roy D. Gilstrap, became the principal and district superintendent of the Atascadero

GILSTRAP REMEMBRANCES *(continued)*

Union High School. Soon after my father's arrival, the board of trustees authorized the acquisition of property to the north and west of the school site, which eventually extended all the way to San Andres Road and north to Santa Lucia Road, excluding those few properties already developed on Santa Lucia Road. Initially the plan was to construct an athletic stadium for football, track and baseball north of the school utilizing the natural terrain, which was shaped like a bowl. As acquisition proceeded during the war years I can remember visits to my grandparents home in Palo Alto and accompanying my father to Stanford Stadium nearby to make detailed measurements of the football field, surrounding track and stadium seats. Surveying of the site was undertaken by I.J. (Dick) Boyd, a civil engineer employed by the county who lived nearby on Santa Lucia Road. Two months after the war ended, grading began on October 9, 1945, and was carried on with county road equipment, used by arrangement with SLO County Supervisor John Ruskovich, the local board representative, under the direction of Campbell Miller. Nearly 15 feet was excavated from the southwest bank and as much as 12 feet filled in, on the northeast bank to form the slope on which the bleachers were later constructed. The field was graded and shale that had been deposited during the grading was raked off the future track and athletic field by some of the high school boys employed to assist the efforts. Topsoil was brought in to cover the infield, irrigation lines were laid and grass was planted. Concrete for the perimeter curb was placed surrounding the field that formed the inside of the quarter-mile (440-yard) oval track. Decomposed granite was laid, rolled and compacted for the track surface. The facility was dedicated on April 12, 1946, to all those from Atascadero High School who served their country during World War II. Sam Hayes, a noted NBC radio newscaster from Los Angeles, gave the dedication address and Frank Wykoff, Olympic star and co-holder of the world's record in the 100-yard dash, started the inaugural track meet.

With the war over, my father and the board retained the architectural firm of Daniel, Mann and Johnson to prepare a master plan of the campus, determine future needs and evaluate the structural adequacy of the buildings to withstand a significant seismic event. (Interestingly, Phil Daniel was a young USC graduate architect employed by a firm in Santa Maria who designed the Agriculture Building built before the war.) Core samples were taken of the concrete in the tower and, sadly, it was determined that it would be necessary to remove all of the structure above the second story ridge line. This was accomplished in 1948. The library's beautiful vaulted roof, trusses and ceiling would also need to be removed. This was undertaken in the early 50s.

As the post-war baby boom began, so did concern about the future adequacy of school facilities. The elementary school added a new classroom building in the late 40's. In order to get the message across about the need for a school bond to build additional facilities at the high school, my father arranged to have a large number of elementary school students posed in front of the high school front door and photographed. The picture was published on the front page of the Atascadero News with the lead-in headline and article, "Will there be room for them when they arrive?" The bond issue passed. The school's architectural and engineering firm, now known as, Daniel, Mann, Johnson and Mendenhall, was engaged to design the new classroom building which would be built adjacent to the south rim of the Memorial Field. Construction of the new classroom buildings began in 1953 and was completed during the 54-55 school year by W. R. Kalshed Co. of San Jose. Unfortunately, my father, whose health had been declining for the previous four years, passed away at the end of the school year, June 27, 1955 one month short of his 51st birthday.

— *David Gilstrap*