

## Setting the Tone for Higher Education The Blanco Star School of Hays County, Texas

*by Christine Hoffman*

*“For the better part of a century the common school district, with its one-, two-, and three-room upgraded schools, was the basic pattern of public education in rural Texas. For many persons the experience of attending the common schools was an important part of growing up Texan. Every crossroads community and rural district had its own school, and in the decentralized system the school and the community were one.”*

Thad Sitton and Milam C. Rowold, *Ringing the Children In*

**I**n a small box in the Texas State University Archives is a school bell. It bears the inscription “1922-1945 Blanco Star School.” The bell is rather small and the handle is not ornate, though it was made of attractively turned wood. It is worn smooth from teachers handling it to call the students to their lessons over the years. The brass is dull from years of exposure and in want of a bit of polish, its warm patina matches the glow of the memories that show in the expressions of the former students of the Blanco Star School as they discuss the time and place that is dear to their hearts. With the bell is a plaque the alumni inscribed with “This Original Bell Rang Throughout the Years at Blanco Star School. It’s [sic] Resounding Melody Set the Tone for a Foundation of Higher Learning. 1922-1945 San Marcos Hays County.”<sup>1</sup>

Before school districts consolidated, Texas counties often had their own school systems to serve children who lived too far from the towns and cities to attend municipal public schools. Local families served on the boards—usually comprised of three men—and the Superintendent of Hays County Schools kept an office at the courthouse in San Marcos.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-twentieth century most of the county schools consolidated with urban and suburban school districts, as the state developed a more elaborate highway system

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<sup>1</sup> Blanco Star School Collection. 1922-2008. Series 90.400.Friends.2008.BlancoStar. University Archives, Texas State University.

<sup>2</sup> Burkholder, A.C. *The Rural Schools of Hays County, TX*. 1918.

In the nineteenth century, the Highland Prairie school community served the region northeast of San Marcos that was located in the Juan Martín deVeramendi land grant.<sup>3</sup> In 1922, the community built a new two-room schoolhouse off Uhland Road near a low water bridge in the city limits of San Marcos. It was near the Caldwell County line, approximately three miles east-northeast of Texas State University. According to Tula Townsend Wyatt, local historian with the Hays County Historical Commission, Blanco Star School stood on the grounds of the former Hays County Poor Farm, "...where the poor, old, and infirm people lived as charges of the county."<sup>4</sup>

This small schoolhouse served rural students of Hays County from 1922 through 1945. It was comprised of one large room with a movable divider that allowed two teachers to separate the first through fourth graders from the fifth through seventh.<sup>5</sup> Local schoolchildren like those in the Schulle family walked to school, usually over fields rather than on sidewalks, and frequently at the mercy of unpredictable Texas weather. Mary Ann (Schulle) Cheatham remembered having to leave the house by seven to get to school by eight o'clock. In later years, the school had a bus, an International station wagon, which Bill Majors, member of the school board, drove. Because the Blanco Star School only offered classes up to the seventh grade, rural students attended high school in San Marcos, and the school bus picked them up first, as they had the furthest to travel.

One might wonder why a university archive would hold artifacts from a county elementary school. The answer is in the educational training it offered. The state normal school system was a form of higher education that trained men and women to be teachers in primary and secondary school. In 1914, Southwest Texas State Teachers College (SWTSTC) opened its own demonstration school on campus. Demonstration schools, though not common today, were more common in the early twentieth century. Essentially, a demonstration school was a primary and/or secondary school that operated on normal schools' grounds, which provided opportunities for the normal school students to practice their teaching skills, and offered educational opportunities for local schoolchildren.

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<sup>3</sup> Langermann, A. B.. Hays County, Map, September 1877; digital image, (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph88639/> : accessed April 01, 2014), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Texas General Land Office, Austin , Texas; Dudley R. Dobie. *A Brief History of Hays County and San Marcos, Texas*, D.R. Dobie: San Marcos, 1948, pp. 60. This collection of stories originally appeared as a series of columns in the San Marcos Daily Record as part of the county centennial celebrations.

<sup>4</sup> Tula Townsend Wyatt, TTWC Schools Collection of the San Marcos Hays County Local History collection of the Public Library in San Marcos, TX. The source for the information about the Hays County Poor Farm is from a document in her handwriting in a clippings file that she donated to the Public Library. Information on the poor farm in Hays County is hard to come by and this is a historical point worth pursuing for anyone interested in the history of Texas county poor farms. Her notes mention that the school was used until the 1930s, which is incorrect, as the Blanco Star School closed in 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014. Mary Ann (Schulle) Cheatham, interviewed by Christine Moscardini-Hall, February 28, 2014. Notes only, in the possession of the author.

Due to a lack of specific archival management practices during the early years of the college, few records of the demonstration schools survived.<sup>6</sup> According to Blanco Star alumni as well as local papers, it is possible that normal school students used Blanco Star as a training school as well.<sup>7</sup> A couple of editions of the yearbook for SWTSTC, *The Pedagog*, contain references to the Blanco Star School. In 1925, a photograph specified it by name, as well as teachers Miss Weise and Miss Haygood. In 1929, the education department's description made a non-specific reference to a rural demonstration school near campus.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, several educators who taught at Blanco Star School graduated from SWTSTC, including Ernestine Hoffman and Violet Fergusson. By 1923, the SWTSTC negotiated an agreement with San Marcos City Schools to develop a cooperative educational arrangement on campus.<sup>9</sup> When Blanco Star closed its doors in 1945, the remaining students transferred to the San Marcos City Public Schools, which were part of the demonstration schools, also referred to as the laboratory schools, on the college campus.

By the 1940s, all of the public schools inside San Marcos were part of the University campus. The high school and middle school were in the education building, which is next to Taylor Murphy Hall, and currently undergoing restoration. The elementary school was in what they called the Auditorium Building at the time, which the university currently calls Evans. To this day, the building interior looks different from many of the other buildings on campus, and the lay out feels somewhat like a primary school.

The university listed the San Marcos school district staff in the course catalog as part of the education department faculty and the students from the demonstration high school had a section in the *Pedagog*.<sup>10</sup> Some students spent the entirety of their educational years on the college grounds from first grade through high school graduation.<sup>11</sup> Over the years, many graduates from Blanco Star attended SWTSTC. Given this context, a better understanding of this school and its history aids the TSU archivists and historians in filling in a gap in university and community history.

It is difficult for someone used to attending school in urban single grade classrooms to imagine what it would be like to go to school in a country schoolhouse. In order to gain a better understanding of the experience, oral history interviews with a few of the former students seemed to be a logical methodology. Wayne Moore, his younger

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<sup>6</sup> Kris Toma, interview by author, San Marcos, January 29, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Taylor, "Dozens Attend Blanco Star School Reunion," *Lockhart Post Register*, August 9, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Southwest Texas State Teachers College, *Pedagog 1925 Yearbook*, (San Marcos, TX: Graduating Class of 1925, 1925), Texas State University Archives, San Marcos Texas, pg. 183, Archives Reading Room; Southwest Texas State Teachers College, *Pedagog 1929 Yearbook*, (San Marcos, TX: Graduating Class of 1929, 1929), Texas State University Archives, San Marcos Texas, pg. 183, Archives Reading Room.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Franklin French, "A History of the Southwest Texas State Teachers College" (master's thesis, Southwest Texas State Teachers College, 1939), 15. Note that SWTSTC was one of the earlier names for the school, which was eventually renamed to Southwest Texas State University, then Texas State University.

<sup>10</sup> Tommy Ruth (Zarnow) Ball, "The Administration of John Garland Flowers: Third President of Southwest Texas State College." (Master's thesis, Southwest Texas State College, 1967), 77.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014

brother Doyle Moore, and Mary Ann (Schulle) Cheatham graciously agreed to share their stories about growing up on the farms of Hays County in the mid-twentieth century.

One of the first and longest-serving school trustees was Henry Schulle, manager of the SWTSTC dairy farm, which was near the current softball field on Charles Austin Drive, but his daughter said that it relocated to Hunter Road in 1947 or 1948. He and his wife Laura (Hofheinz) Schulle had eleven children, at least one of whom attended the Blanco Star School each year it was open. Four of the Schulle children attended first through seventh grade, though the younger children had to make the transfer to what Cheatham referred to as the “city schools” in San Marcos. She recalled that her sister Wanda opened the school and that her brother Henry Lee was there when it closed. While her father was on the school board, her mother was an active member of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the Home Demonstration Club.

When asked if it was distracting to sit in the same room with students from other grades and to have a teacher supervising lessons in each, Cheatham commented that she thought the mixed grade classrooms gave the students a bit of an advantage. Hearing the lessons of the other grades every year offered both a preview and a review of various subject matters. She claimed that many students who made the transfer to San Marcos Public Schools skipped a grade based on school subject testing.<sup>12</sup>

Wayne Moore remembered, “One of my best experiences about it [Blanco Star School] was that sometime late in the afternoon the teacher would read to us all...” He recalled that it took several days to read some books, such as *Wuthering Heights*. He reminisced that the teacher “always had a book reading going on and most of us were all ears listening to that... drama and teachers made it as interesting as they could, and it was to me a great memory of... hearing the old literature read to us, you know.”<sup>13</sup>

While some of the other interviewees gave descriptions of the classroom and aspects of lessons they liked or disliked, Cheatham’s recollections of her school days at Blanco Star kept wandering back out to the schoolyard. Truthfully, she would have preferred to play outside with the boys to any type of school environment. Her favorite activities included baseball (she liked being the catcher), marbles, and a game called “dare ball,” which involved lining up in a manner that is similar to Red Rover, and “daring” a specific person to stop you from reaching the other side. If they caught you, you were out of the game.

One might think a young woman in Texas would get in trouble back then for playing such active sports with the boys; rather, it was her skill at marbles which caused her problems. “My mother wrote a note to the teacher one day,” she explained. “Don’t let

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Ann (Schulle) Cheatham, interviewed by Christine Moscardini-Hall, February 28, 2014. Notes only, in the possession of the author.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014

Mary Ann play marbles,” it read. Cheatham laughed and explained, “My mother was tired of finding them around the house. I had too many.”<sup>14</sup>

As the school districts consolidated, many county schools, including Blanco Star, closed down. The last students left Blanco Star in 1945 and transferred to the San Marcos school district schools on SWTSTC’s campus. The last teachers at the school, Mrs. Audrey Jerles Herron and Mrs. Ernestine Hoffman, took jobs within the San Marcos school district as well and spent the rest of their lives in Hays County.<sup>15</sup> Of all the former teachers of Blanco Star, Mrs. Ernestine Hoffman is the only one currently living, and her former student Doyle Moore still visits her.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, as of the writing of this article, she was unavailable for an interview.

Some students, like Wayne Moore, looked forward to the move. He had transferred to the city schools due to his parents moving into town, and he enjoyed having more students around. During World War II, Moore stated that most of the college students were girls and that the high school principal, Mr. Yancy Yarbrough, like many of the other men on campus, went off to the war. For the most part, the primary and secondary students studied separately from the college, aside from the student teachers. The shop and agriculture classes, however, used the college’s maintenance shop.<sup>17</sup>

Cheatham recalled that she had a strong preference for the Blanco Star School because the new classes were bigger. At Blanco Star there were only three or four students in her grade, and she felt that it was an environment where it was easier for her to be more academically successful. Even with multiple grades in the classroom, there were fewer students in the room at Blanco Star than at the school in San Marcos.

While the stories of the Blanco Star School days are full of nostalgia and enjoyable to hear, one of the most intriguing aspects of this community is the lifelong dedication that Blanco Star students have demonstrated to their community. In the early 1980s, Moore and his wife spoke often with former teacher Audrey Jerles Herron, whom the children knew as Mrs. Jerles. Together they decided to plan a school reunion, and Herron worked to locate as many former students as she could. She located two hundred former students and they invited them to the first reunion, held August 24, 1982. Eighty-four alumni attended the first gathering, and Herron kept records each year of who attended and who did not. (See Figure 2)

Each year after the first, reunion attendance declined. The archives files contain multiple letters excusing alumna’s absences, primarily due to health and distance.

<sup>14</sup> Cheatham, Mary Ann (Schulle), interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos, February 24, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Moore, Doyle, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, by telephone, February 2014. Notes only, in the possession of the author.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014. Note: in the interview Wayne Moore identified the principal as Ralph Yarbrough, however, records indicate that it was Yancy Yarbrough who was the principal. Ralph Yarbrough was a popular Democratic politician, which may have caused the name confusion.

Regardless, these letters demonstrate the tight-knit community that remained long after the building was demolished and replaced with the Hays County Jail. The various classes had a web of communication and ways of passing on information to distant families. Through all the years since the Blanco Star School closed, Herron, who truly showed a love for her work, the school, and all her students, kept the bell. When her health started to fail her, she gave the bell to former student Linda Schulle. Herron also passed along her notebook and her role of organizer to Moore, who intends to donate the notebook and ongoing records to TSU's Archives in the future.<sup>18</sup> (See Figure 3)

Alumna Wanda (Schulle) Holterman, one of the first students at Blanco Star, was instrumental in reconnecting the community with TSU. She bowled with one of the professors, who brought the school and its records to the attention of Dr. Ron Brown of the history department.<sup>19</sup> At the students' invitation, some faculty and staff from TSU began attending the reunions, and have each year since at least 2008. Indeed, the community was so welcoming that each person I spoke to made sure that I would be getting an invitation as well. Their kindness and Texan hospitality crosses generations and makes one feel like one of their classmates from the schoolyard.

In many ways, this article began like the school day of many early nineteenth century schoolchildren, with the ringing of a bell. Although I had chosen another topic to explore, a class meeting at the University Archives set me on a different path entirely. Our professor, Dan K. Utley, encouraged the archivist, Kris Toma, to tell us about stories that needed writing or about materials in the collections that other researchers had not used. He encouraged me in particular to consider one of these topics due to my love of a good story.

At their annual reunion in 2008, the remaining students of the Blanco Star School in attendance donated materials related to their school and reunions to the TSU Archives as a way for them to ensure that the cherished items would have a good home when they were no longer able to care for them. At the next Freshman Convocation, university officials rang the Blanco Star school bell to welcome the new students. A fortunate encounter in the University Archives led to a conversation with Dr. Brown. When asked about the bell ringing at the convocation, he modestly replied that it was his suggestion. His university had an old school bell from their early history, and he thought it would provide a symbolic way for the Associated Student Government president to welcome the new class each year.<sup>20</sup> The Blanco Star alumni were overjoyed to learn that its "resounding melody" continued to build a foundation for higher learning for students across the generations.

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<sup>18</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014

<sup>19</sup> Moore, Wayne, and Helen, interview by Christine Moscardini-Hall, San Marcos Public Library, February 5, 2014

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Ronald C. Brown in discussion with the author, April 25, 2014 at the Texas State University Archives.

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