

Memories of Merlin

The May 9 celebration at MAPS marks their 50th anniversary at the “new” location. There have been other “new” (and different) schools in Merlin’s history, and some of them are highlighted here.

Old wooden structures are vulnerable to fire hazards (to wit: Notre Dame in Paris). The original Merlin School, set up in 1879, burned in 1909 and was rebuilt. Its official name was Union S.S. 5 Raleigh and Tilbury East. The new Merlin School which was then erected also burned in 1942 just before the opening of the new fall term. Each time, the villagers and neighbouring communities had to debate and struggle with the added expenses this caused, and many lively meetings were largely attended. This was especially true in 1942 while the war was still on in Europe and many resources were being conserved for the war efforts. Most people agreed on the necessity of a new public school, but the drive for a discrete high school was the source of much controversy. Ratepayers in other parts of the school section did not want to be taxed for the cost of the school in the village. Many businessmen in Merlin, however, rallied for its existence as did the students in their temporary quarters.



So, in 1944-45, the new Public School was built and opened, and lower grades had a modern and comfortable building to call their own. (This is the building by the Community Hall, now apartments.) The upper grades had to tolerate seven years of makeshift accommodations in different locations in the village before their dream of a new school would come to pass.



So, in 1944-45, the new Public School was built and opened, and lower grades had a modern and comfortable building to call their own. (This is the building by the Community Hall, now apartments.) The upper grades had to tolerate seven years of makeshift accommodations in different locations in the village before their dream of a new school would come to pass.

accommodations in different locations in the village before their dream of a new school would come to pass.

In the early days of the fall term of 1942, classes were moved to church basements (lower grades) and to three rooms in the Willan block (upper grades) which were crowded and uncomfortable but gratefully accepted. The two teachers at the time were Miss Eloise

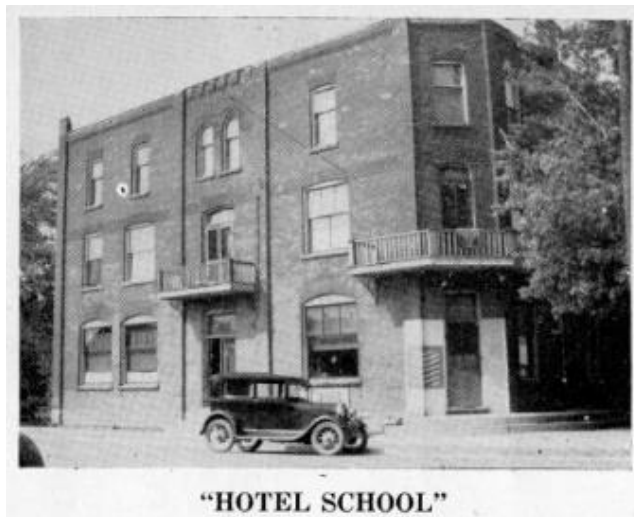


Hamlyn (principal) and Miss Mary **Fletcher**. Just in time, the school trustees secured a third teacher, Miss Lillian **Baker**, for the 50 or so students enrolled. As a pleasant diversion from the cramped conditions, students were able to peer out the windows until one day they discovered them white-washed as a deterrent to their wandering minds. Just a few days

before Christmas that year, they were informed they were moving to more spacious quarters in the old Hotel. The initial student reaction was “crummy idea”. (It seems that only one year at MCS in the Hotel was enough for Miss Baker as she was replaced the following year by Miss **Axford**.)

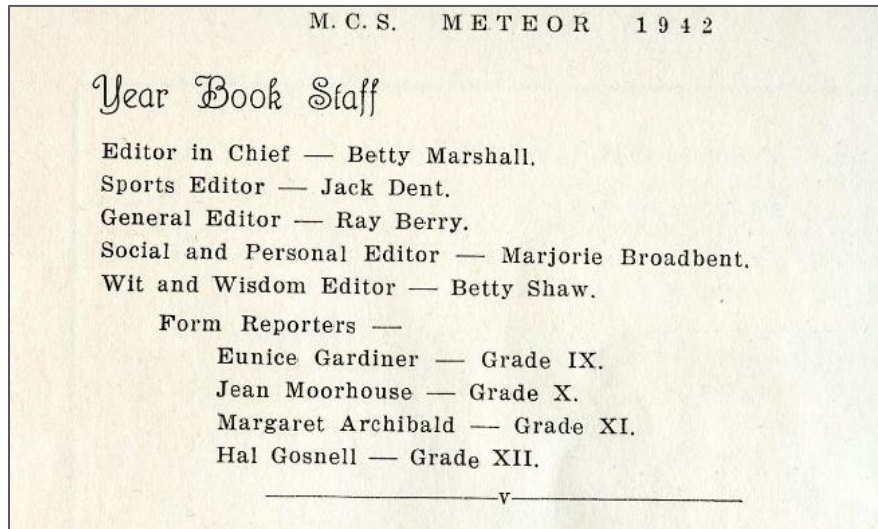
According to a piece in *The Meteor* yearbook in 1943, by student Maxine Kirby, the students’ first reaction to the location was not so far from the reality they faced. The glories of the Hotel, in its heyday, were no more. Kirby describes “the long, gloomy corridors, musty little rooms...the dark foreboding basement steps, the fallen plaster and cobwebs” which all resembled “the perfect background for a Dracula movie”.

She continues: “To enter first form [Grade 9] we go through a room where stands an ancient relic of a bathtub. The Second and Fifth Formers use the old kitchen for their form-room and the Third and Fourth Forms hold forth in the former Dining Room, which has large windows facing the street [Erie].” Furthermore, according to Kirby, the students felt somewhat exposed to the stares of the passing villagers who seemed to regard them “as if [they] were a new and different species of Wild Life.”



But overall they were happy to have windows once again to peer through when teachers’ backs were turned. Also, their new “modern to the *n*th degree” chair-style desks were a source of pleasure. No longer fastened to the floor, desks shifted easily when students used

their feet to push, much to the displeasure of Miss Fletcher who exclaimed, "This room looks like the lobby of a second-rate hotel, all it lacks is the cuspidors!" (Look that one up if you need to.)



Indeed, the students really pulled together and created the yearbooks that provide us with many of the memories of those days. Some of the students who worked on the effort that year are shown here.

Their reports of life at the Hotel school provide us with a picture of the conditions they had to study in and the fun they managed to have despite the adversities. Much of it would be unimaginable to today's students. Try telling your grandchildren that, in order to get to classes in a decrepit building, some students rode their bikes for miles on gravel roads (as reported by Marion (Jones) Peltier who was there three years), dodging flying bits of stone thrown up by passing vehicles!

It wasn't until 1949 that the repeated calls for a new high school were met by the opening of MDHS which cost \$120,000 to build. It was established as a district school serving several communities. No one was happier than the staff and students, and there was much celebration.

And then, about 30 years later, the powers-that-be had it torn down.

On the next page is the picture of the float the students entered into the 1944 parade in town. If you can add any names, please let us know.

