

HISTORY OF PIONEER SCHOOL DISTRICT/by Jeff Mason, Arcade Class of 1966

Starting in Arcade in 1811, schools have existed for 195 years in what is now the Pioneer district. In time, most towns had a dozen or more school districts, since the schools had to be located close enough for the students to walk.

These early schools were poorly funded and very primitive. The rare student who desired secondary education would have to go out of the area to obtain it until 1863, when the private Arcade Academy opened on the site of the present elementary school. In 1870, this became a public union free school, with its first three graduates receiving their diplomas in 1887. By 1900, union free schools had also been formed in Sardinia, Delevan, Freedom, and Machias.

The one-room rural schools continued to operate, and students who didn't live within walking distance of a union free school would have to commute by horse or train, or else board with a family in town if they wished to attend high school. As high school became more popular, a brick annex was added to the old Academy building in Arcade. During the first two decades of the 20th century, Freedom and Machias both rebuilt their high schools as a result of fire, and Delevan was forced to rebuild its high school twice due to fires.

During the 1920s, Sardinia lost its four-year high school privileges until it constructed a new school late in the decade, while the Freedom school graduated its final class in 1924. The old Arcade building was demolished in 1927 and classes were held in other locations for a year while a new school was built during the 1927-28 school year. The final major building project for a local union free school came when an addition was built at the Machias school in 1935.

A 1936 atlas published by the State Education Department showed 62 school buildings operating within or just outside the present Pioneer district. The days of the one- and two-room schoolhouses were numbered, however, due to the invention of the school bus. No longer did students have to live within walking distance of their school, and the state began pushing for rural districts to centralize.

In the summer of 1938, voters in 26 small districts approved the creation of Arcade Central School. The size of the school building was doubled, including more classrooms and an auditorium, and many of the small rural schools were closed and the buildings sold once the addition opened in 1939.

Two years later, in 1941, several districts to the south voted to form the Delevan Central School. World War II led to a severe teacher shortage for small high schools, and in 1943 the Sardinia district joined Arcade Central School. In 1946, Joseph Kemp began his 20-year tenure as the supervising principal at Arcade Central.

The year 1949 brought the end of the union free schools, when Machias was joined with Delevan to create Delevan-Machias Central School. This was not always a happy union, and bitter disputes raged over where to locate a much-needed new building. During this time, students in the Delevan-Machias district divided their school years among the old frame school building in Yorkshire, the Delevan and Machias buildings, and other rented quarters, which became increasingly crowded as the postwar baby boom continued.

During this controversial period, the school board hired a new supervising principal

named George Crawford in 1954. Late that year, the voters approved building a new K-12 building directly behind the Delevan building. More court fights ensued before construction began, and the new building opened in 1958. The Yorkshire school was sold, the old Delevan school was demolished, and the Machias building was used for a few classes before it was closed and later sold. (People can still visit the former Machias school in its new incarnation as a second-hand store.)

By the early 1950s, Arcade Central had also become very crowded, so in 1952 the voters approved the construction of a \$700,000 elementary addition. This included a cafeteria and 17 classrooms, and once it opened in 1954 it became possible for the district to close most of its remaining one-room schoolhouses. It wasn't long, however, before the Arcade school was overcrowded yet again. The voters approved the purchase of land on Liberty Street south of the village, but in 1962 they rejected a plan to construct a junior-senior high school there. The state's master plan called for the merger of Delevan-Machias and West Valley. While that looked good on the maps in Albany, it was not geographically. However, no state aid would be available for Delevan-Machias if it tried to do a building project on its own.

The two supervising principals, Joseph Kemp at Arcade and George Crawford at Delevan, first discussed the idea of a merger during a telephone conversation in the fall of 1963. They enlisted the support of their district superintendents, Duane Sproul in Cattaraugus County and Victor Blom in Wyoming County, and then approached their boards of education. The two boards met jointly on January 8, 1964, along with their district superintendents and a representative of the State Education Department, and agreed to make an exploratory study.

In 1965 the state Legislature passed a law encouraging the process of school district reorganization by offering very generous state incentives in terms of operating and building aid. For awhile, the Franklinville school board also considered becoming a part of a three-way merger. Following the delivery of a financial study, the Delevan-Machias and Arcade boards met jointly on January 12, 1966 and decided to proceed toward the goal of a merger. Claris Persons of Delevan was elected chairman of the joint boards, and committees were appointed to explore possible sites for a new school, prepare a brochure, and to inform the voters of the boards' interest in consolidating the districts.

Petitions were circulated throughout the two districts asking the commissioner of education to amend the state master plan to list the two districts as a proposed new central district. Once the commissioner granted his approval in the spring, a second round of petitions was signed, asking him to authorize a vote on a proposition to reorganize the districts. On May 16, 1966, he issued a notice calling for a vote on May 31. This gave the two boards just 15 days to prepare for the crucial vote.

District voters were barraged with publicity and other materials promoting the merger, as well as the concerns of people who opposed the loss of local school identity and the creation of a district that might become too large and impersonal. When the votes were counted, the tally of 1,404 to 663 provided a better than two-to-one margin of support.

Before the new district could begin operating on July 1, a school board had to be elected. Sardinia Supervisor Arthur Carlsen presided over a meeting of more than 400 district voters who gathered to form a school board from scratch. A non-controversial voice vote approved the creation of a nine-member board, followed by nominations and voting for terms of varying lengths. An informal gentlemen's agreement had already paved the way

for the idea that the board would reflect the geographic diversity of the sprawling district. It was well past midnight by the time the process was complete, but the board members were to find that their new unpaid positions would usually keep them at school board meeting past midnight once a week for the next few years. A few days after their election, the board members elected Verne Goodemote of Chaffee as their first president.

The new district also had to have a district principal before it could come into being. Since Arcade's principal, Joseph Kemp, had announced his intention to retire several months earlier, the logical person to head the new district was George Crawford, who had been the principal at Delevan-Machias since 1954. Kenneth Storms, who had been Mr. Kemp's assistant at Arcade, was named assistant district principal. By the end of the summer, William O'Connell had come from Limestone to become the new high school principal at Delevan, and Eugene Edwards was hired as high school principal at Arcade.

When the merged district came into being on July 1, its only name was the official designation as Yorkshire No.1. The board knew it would be unwise to combine the names of the former districts, since Delevan-Machias already had a hyphenated name, and there was sure to be a controversy over which name should go first. If all three names had been combined, the resulting acronym could have been MAD Central or DAM Central. There was also still the possibility that Franklinville might decide to merge later, so a name had to be chosen that didn't contain the name of any community. District residents were invited to submit their ideas for a name. Since one of the possible sites for a new high school was used for growing beans, one suggestion was to have a Green Bean Central School. Another proposal, Citizens Central School, was a takeoff on the name of the principal local bank at the time. Several people, however, suggested the name "Pioneer," since the reorganization of the two former districts had been the first in the state under New York's 1965 incentive plan.

By the middle of the summer, Pioneer was approved as the district's popular name, although it took quite some time before the students in the two high schools thought of themselves as Pioneer, rather than Arcade or Delevan-Machias, students. When school opened in September 1966, the members of the future Class of 1979 entered kindergarten as the first class that would go through the full 13 years as Pioneer students.

The school board had already decided before the May 31 vote that the Yorkshire area would be the logical location for a new high school, since it was halfway between the two existing high schools. Two sites, both used for farming, received serious consideration. The first was a combination of the Mauer and Lee farms on along Route 39 and County Line Road; these farms now include Tractor Supply Co. and Arcade Valley Estates along Route 39, and houses, apartments and churches along County Line Road. The second site was 78 acres of the Steve Smith farm between County Line and Old Olean roads in Cattaraugus County. After considering a variety of factors, the board recommended buying the Smith site for about \$70,000, and this was approved by district voters in February 1967.

At first, the State Education Department favored a new high school for grades 9-12, but by the fall of 1966, State Ed was recommending a junior-senior high school for grades 7-12. The Kenmore firm of Fenno, Reynolds & Jones was hired to develop preliminary plans, with Franklinville native Gordon Jones as the principal architect. Once the land was purchased, Jones began soliciting ideas about what people wanted to see in a new building. By late spring, he had developed plans for a \$4.6 million building, with a vote set for June 21. The vote on the bond issue for the new junior-senior high building was

favorable, and detailed plans were prepared. The district faced an unexpected crisis as the vote on the new building approached, when an arson fire in late May caused heavy damage to part of the 1954 section of the Arcade building, forcing several classes to be relocated temporarily.

When the district's assistant principal, Mr. Storms, retired in 1967, Eugene Edwards was promoted to assistant principal in charge of business affairs, and Raymond Garlapo, a longtime teacher, succeeded him as the high school principal at Arcade. For the next two years, one of the main challenges of principals O'Connell and Garlapo was to prepare their students and staffs for the eventual move into the new building at Yorkshire. The two elementary principals, Anthony Faso at Delevan and Charles Perks at Arcade, also began preparing for the time when their respective buildings would be used exclusively for the elementary grades.

In a split vote in late 1967, the school board decided to use an electric heating system for the new building to take advantage of low electric rates offered by the Village of Arcade. This controversial decision led to the formation of a citizens' committee, which took the district to court over the matter. One of the reasons the school board had selected the Fenno, Reynolds & Jones architectural firm in 1966 was its record of never exceeding a bond issue. Unfortunately, Pioneer became the first client whose bond issue fell short, and the district had to go back to the voters again in the spring of 1968 to ask for an additional \$525,000. This took place in the middle of the electric heat controversy, and the voters narrowly defeated the proposal for additional funding.

Excavation began for the new building in the spring, and the steelwork went up early that summer. Near the end of 1968, a second vote was held after over \$100,000 was cut out of the previous proposal. Passage of this pared-down proposal allowed the building to be completed, but without some aspects of site development that had to be postponed.

As the junior-senior high school neared completion, the urgency of the project was brought into focus in May of 1969 when it was announced that St. Pius X School in Delevan would close at the end of the semester. Pioneer had already created several classrooms in the bus garage in Delevan and was using portable classrooms in Arcade, as well as the buildings in Sardinia, Curriers and Java Village, so finding room for the additional 210 students from St. Pius would have been nearly impossible without the new building in Yorkshire.

To prepare for the opening of the new school, Delevan's Buzz Chaddock was named athletic director, and Arcade teacher Ray Cenni was selected as assistant principal. Support staff members prepared for the challenge of moving into a building that was not nearly complete on opening day. Students had to bring their lunches until the cafeteria was ready, boxes had to be emptied, and several classes were held in hallways until classrooms were completed. For seventh-graders and seniors alike, entering this school was a whole new experience. The Class of 1970 in particular faced the challenge of turning two junior classes into one senior class, and to ease the transition the class had two sets of officers and advisors.

Sports teams, musical ensembles and clubs from the two buildings had to be merged into one, and two faculties had to work as one. The first year was certainly not without its difficulties, but they were offset by the spacious classrooms, the large gymnasium, and a swimming pool. Even the pool caused a controversy just before school opened, when it was announced that boys in phys ed classes would swim in the nude. That proposal was

soon modified.

A special source of pride for the district was the 1,200-seat auditorium. Former Superintendent Crawford recalled recently that vocal music teacher Jane Titus advocated designing an auditorium large enough to host the Buffalo Philharmonic. That dream has become a reality several times over the years since the opening of the aud and dedication of the building in April 1970.

The presence of a nearly debt-free modern school building and the abundance of jobs in the area led to a much more rapid growth in the district's population than had been projected in 1966. Soon after the opening of the junior-senior high school, it became apparent that another building would be needed. The board had considered this possibility when it selected a building site in 1966-67, and the decision was made to proceed with the concept of a middle school, rather than a traditional junior high school.

Since William O'Connell was the principal in charge of the junior-high grades in Yorkshire, he took the lead in turning the middle school concept into a reality and served as its leader until he retired ten years ago. Gordon Jones was again hired to draw up plans, and voters gave their approval for a \$5.2 million building in May of 1973. A year later, ground was broken by a group of third graders from the Class of '83, which became the first class to attend the middle school from fifth through eighth grades. The middle school opened in September 1975, and thanks to the generous incentive aid from the state, it had the rare status of being completely paid for before it opened.

At the district level, Pioneer became a superintendency in 1968, and George Crawford became the first to hold the title of superintendent. Following his retirement in 1972, Dr. Harry Packer held the position during the middle school transition period. Upon Mr. Garlapo's retirement in 1974, Ray Cenni became high school principal until assuming the superintendency at Sherman in 1986. The sudden death of Mr. Faso in 1973 led to the hiring of Mary Simons, an Arcade Central graduate, as the principal at Delevan. She served there for several years before returning briefly to the classroom; upon the retirement of Mr. Perks in 1980, Miss Simons began her long tenure as principal at Arcade. Also in 1980, the elementary school at Sardinia was closed and Michael Medden was appointed principal at Delevan.

Pioneer, like many districts, experimented with many elective courses in the early 1970s, but the mid-1970s brought the return of more traditional course requirements. Another major change was the rise of girls' sports at the interscholastic level. A Committee of 44 was formed in 1976 as a result of concerns about drug use and a perceived lack of discipline at the high school. A protracted contract dispute between the board and the teachers' union began that summer, and the following winter the district was criticized for its response to the Blizzard of '77. The school board decided not to renew Dr. Packer's contract that year, and Henry Heslop began his 13-year tenure as district superintendent.

During the Heslop years, the district began using its incentive aid to undertake a program of periodic renovation projects that modernized the physical plants at the two elementary schools and provided for the maintenance and expansion of all four buildings. A particularly trying time for the district came in the mid-1980s, when the state comptroller's office recommended that the district become more aggressive with its investments. This led to a significant loss when the Lion Capital Group failed and the state turned its back on the school districts that had followed the comptroller's advice.

David Kurzawa came to Pioneer in 1981 and became the district's fourth superintendent when Mr. Heslop retired in 1990. Upon Mr. Kurzawa's retirement in 2002, interim superintendents—first Ray Cenni and later Michael Medden—led the district until Dr. Jeffrey Bowen was named to the post in Sept. 2003.

Delevan Elementary lost its longtime principal, Mr. Medden, to retirement in 2005. The district's longest-serving administrator as of Feb. 2007 was Arcade principal Kevin Munro, who took over in 1999 following Miss Simons' retirement.

Nearly all of the 1966 faculty and support staff have retired or left the district, but as of 2001 over 50 members of the current faculty, nearly 90 members of the support staff, and six members of the school board were graduates of Pioneer or its predecessors.

An area in which Pioneer has lived up to its name is technology. At the urging of high school math teacher Gary Bruce, the district began acquiring and using computers in the 1970s. Through grants and other sources of funding, Pioneer has acquired an extensive network of computers and offers community education so that residents can meet the challenges of technology head-on. Most students at Pioneer today are proficient at using technology that was not dreamed of in 1966. At the same time, however, the district's students and staff are faced with meeting much more rigorous and frequent assessments than in the past.

The auditorium at the high school has been the scene of many musical and dramatic performances that reflect the training provided in all four buildings. Both Arcade and Delevan-Machlas had active band and chorus programs prior to the merger, but Pioneer has also been able to provide an orchestra program since 1973. Musical directors such as Nancy Hurlburt and Elwyn Roll and dramatic directors such as Sandy Stachowiak and their casts have provided audiences with memorable performances, climaxed by the winning of the prestigious Kenny Award in 1997 for the musical "Over Here!"

The vocational agriculture program at Pioneer has long served as a model for the rest of the state, and teams from the FFA chapter have won numerous district and state championships. Once the high school opened, Spanish was added to the foreign language program, and Advanced Placement courses were instituted at the high school in 1980. Numerous overseas trips have brought attention to the extensive travel opportunities Pioneer students have had in conjunction with their educational program.

Several thousand students have graduated from Pioneer. The Golden Anniversary class entered school in 2003.