A history of Mt. Horeb would not be complete without some background information pertaining to our present school system. Before Wisconsin was organized as a territory in 1836, there was no provision for public education in the region. The first schools were established by the Jesuits for the purpose of converting and civilizing the Indians. In the period from 1836 to 1860 the schools were small log structures, poorly equipped, with rough plank seats. The teachers were chosen from the settlements at hand, whether qualified or not. As early as 1836 the pioneers in what is now Blue Mounds township realized the need of education and built the first school in this section. It was erected in Brigham’s Woods, near the present site of the Cave of the Mounds.

By 1837 the federal government set aside every sixteenth section in Wisconsin townships for school lands. Most of the townships in Dane County were settled in the 1840’s, so school houses in that decade sprang up on every hand.

Although the exact date is not available, District No. 1, or the Haney School, was erected a few years prior to 1866 on a lot a short distance from “Brackenwagon’s Corner”, now known as “Luhman’s Corner”, about a mile west of the village. When the railroad came through in 1881, the school building had to be moved for the right-of-way, but continued on until the close of the 1882-1883 term.

The 1883 fall term opened with most of the Haney pupils and Mt. Horeb children attending classes in a building near the stockyards, which had been operated as a saloon during the building of the railroad. A Miss M. Maynard has the honor of being the first teacher in the village of Mt. Horeb. The 1884 fall term opened in the new one-room brick school house on West Main Street, known as District No. 1, but by 1887 the building was enlarged to provide three class rooms.

In order not to break the sequence of the Haney school history, we have moved ahead of our story, for the first public school was built in our village in 1875 in the old town, in the extreme southern section of what is now Union Cemetery, facing Ninth Street. It was originally a one-room frame building, but later a basement and second room were added. This building was in use until 1918, when it was removed to create additional space for the expansion of the cemetery.

As the village grew and prospered, the brick school house on West Main Street, in what was then known as the new town, became greatly inadequate, and in 1889 a two-story brick structure was erected to the east of the first building. In the course of time, facilities were again inadequate, and this time the roof of the first building was raised and a second story added. These two buildings were in use until the completion of the original part of the present school building in January, 1919.

A significant development in Mt. Horeb’s educational system occurred in 1893 with the completion of the Lutheran Academy. Mr. H. B. Dahle, a pioneer businessman, had purchased five acres of land from Carl Boeck, with the intention of plotting the area for homes. The Rev. S. Gunderson persuaded Mr. Dahle to donate the acreage to be used as the site for the Lutheran Academy. The church was planning to erect a large brick structure was completed in 1893 at a cost of about $12,000. The entire sum was raised by free-will offerings from the people of Mt. Horeb and vicinity. Classes opened in 1893, but several weeks the student body met in the local furniture store. On October 3 the building was ready for use, and 116 students were enrolled.
During the course of its ten-year existence, the Academy housed many students from other communities as boarding students. A fifty cents weekly rental per room was charged; food per person averaged $1.25 per week, and tuition was $1.00 per week. Students who registered for an entire school term paid $25 in advance; otherwise the tuition ran as follows: fall term, $8.00, winter term, $12, spring term, $7.00. First in importance in the curriculum was religious training, but three courses of study were offered—classical, normal, and commercial.

In April, 1901, the village voted to have a free high school. Two hundred dollars was needed, plus tuition and state aid to maintain the school. However, the idea was temporarily dropped when few students passed the initial entrance examinations, and it was not until May, 1903, that the high school became a reality when a referendum was finally passed in favor of free high school education.

In September of that year 65 students were enrolled, with 3 teachers employed. In addition to the required curriculum, a concert and lecture course was added, and the first football team was organized. The high school continued on in the Academy Building, which the village had purchased for $5,000, until February 2, 1917, when the structure burned to its foundations. Classes were then held in the West Side School, the village library, the Opera House Building, the Village Hall, and the Lutheran Church basement, until the completion of the new high school building in January, 1919, at a cost of $115,000. The new building housed 8 grades and 4 years of high school. On February 4, 1932, the bonded indebtedness of $60,000, plus interest, was paid in full.

Over 500 students were enrolled by 1940, necessitating an addition, which was completed in 1941 at a cost of $100,000. This included a larger gymnasium, music room, rooms for agricultural course and additional room for overcrowded departments in the old building.

Transportation for our rural students began in 1941 with the purchase of 2 school buses. By 1956 the school bus fleet had been increased to 6 and was housed in a new $35,000 school bus garage. The school property was enlarged in 1948 by the purchase of two and one-half acres of land adjoining the school at a cost of $2,150, and in 1949 a contract was awarded to a Madison firm for the erection of an agricultural shop and class room building at a cost of $26,500.
Plans for a unified school district were first discussed in 1947. This was a unit of local school government for administering and financing both elementary and high school education within the entire territory of the district. A single school district treasurer and one uniform school tax rate throughout the district were supposed advantages. Another object of this plan was to qualify for additional state and federal aid. The plan was not adopted, however, but in 1948 plans for considering a Union Free High School were discussed, and by October, 1949, were adopted. This district consisted of the village of Mt. Horeb and 43 surrounding farms, affording additional means of rural representation in school affairs.

Further improvements in the school building were made in 1952 and 1953 with a $4,000 remodeling program of the home economics kitchen; the conversion of the old gymnasium into a lunch room, kitchen, two class rooms and a multiple-purpose room; and the remodeling of the heating and ventilating system, at a total cost of $85,000. A special education room, operated by the county, was instituted in 1955.

By 1959 the population of the Mt. Horeb High School District had risen to 5,100, and included the village of Mt. Horeb, the village of Blue Mounds, parts of the towns of Springdale, Blue Mounds, Vermont, Primrose, Cross Plains, and Perry, all in Dane County, and part of the town of Moscow in Iowa County, with a total enrollment of 700 students, from kindergarten through high school. Seventeen classroom teachers were employed in the high school and fourteen in the elementary grades.

Information meetings were held during this year to explain the need of additional school facilities. During 1959 all of the areas sending their students to Mt. Horeb High School on a tuition basis saw fit to join the school district, with the exception of an area in the town of Primrose. This changed the valuation of the area from nine million to about twenty-two million, providing enough tax base to permit the building of a new school.

The Thompson farm, on the east edge of Mt. Horeb, was selected as a site for the new school, and in April, 1960, a district referendum authorized a $1,050,000 bond issue for purchase of the 30 acre site and erection and equipping of a new high school.

John Flad and Associates, a Madison architectural firm, drew up plans for the new school; bids were let in September, and construction began in October, 1960. The new building will contain twenty-six teacher stations, and will accommodate enrollment of five-hundred students. It is expected that high school enrollment will exceed four hundred by 1965.

The high school will move to its new location in December, 1961. A study is now being made by a committee of board members and laymen to determine the best use of the present school building for future educational needs.

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