

FLORINNE McFARLAN

A Teacher for Generations

FROM A ONE ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE TO A LASTING PLACE IN BRENTWOOD'S HISTORY



Florinne E. "West" McFarlan, 1890 - 1977

A TEACHER REMEMBERED

When Florinne E. "West" McFarlan accepted her first teaching position at Lone Tree School in 1912, Brentwood was a very different community. Farms and ranches dominated the landscape. One teacher could be responsible for children from first through eighth grade, while heat came from a wood or coal burning stove and water from a hand-pumped cistern.

It was there that Florinne began a remarkable career serving generations of East Contra Costa County children. Her career stretched from the horse and buggy era into the age of jet travel, yet former students remembered the same thing most clearly: their teacher.

"She made us pay attention. So I think we learned an awful lot."

FROM BOULDER CREEK TO LONE TREE

Florinne was born in 1890 to Howard and Anna West and grew up in Boulder Creek in Santa Cruz County. Her father had emigrated from New Brunswick, Canada, in 1879.

After graduating from San Jose Normal School in 1912, now San Jose State University, Florinne came to East Contra Costa County for her first teaching assignment. She boarded with Mr. and Mrs. Shellenberger at the southwest corner of Sand Creek Road.

Family accounts say she made many trips between Lone Tree and Boulder Creek by horse and buggy, carrying a .32 Smith & Wesson beneath the seat. The detail captures the independence required of a young teacher in rural California.

ONE ROOM, ONE TEACHER, EIGHT GRADES

Florinne taught children across eight grade levels in the same room. Younger children listened to lessons intended for older students, while older students helped younger children. Long before terms such as multi age learning and peer mentoring became common, they were part of everyday life at Lone Tree.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS, FAIRLY APPLIED

Students described Florinne as an old time teacher who expected attention, effort and good behavior. Her methods reflected the era, but what endured was her fairness and encouragement. One letter writer called her "an icon always remembered for her even handedness and encouraging demeanor."

One former student marveled, "Mrs. McFarland taught all eight classes. I don't know how she did it."

MORE THAN A CLASSROOM TEACHER

Being the teacher at a rural school meant much more than preparing lessons. One former student remembered Florinne picking him up for school. Because he traveled with his teacher, he arrived early and stayed late while she prepared the building.

In winter, she started the fire so the room would be warm when children arrived. Water came from a cistern and was pumped by hand, and sometimes had to be hauled to the school. Florinne helped make sure there was a school ready for children each morning.

A CAREER AND A LEGACY



Lone Tree School. The facade identifies the building as "Erected 1908."



Museum interpretation of a one room schoolhouse classroom from Florinne's era. This is a historical recreation, not her actual classroom.

BOOK LEARNING AND PEOPLE LEARNING

Lone Tree served a small agricultural community whose enrollment could change with the seasons. Children of different ages and backgrounds learned, ate lunch and played together. Former students remembered remarkably little division among them. "We just considered we were all just the same," one recalled.

Looking back, students believed the experience taught independence, cooperation, responsibility and how to get along with others. One summarized it as "book learning and people learning."

A FAMILY ROOTED HERE

Florinne met Joseph McFarlan, a third generation member of a pioneering Antioch area ranching family. They married in June 1914 and raised six children in East Contra Costa County.

According to family history, Florinne's teaching salary helped hold the family together during the Great Depression. After leaving farming, Joseph worked at the steel mill in Pittsburg until retirement.

A CAREER THAT CALLED HER BACK

Florinne eventually stepped away from teaching to raise her family, but education called her back. She later served for two years as a principal in Knightsen before returning to Lone Tree School, where she taught for another 20 years.

She then taught eight additional years and completed her career at Oakley Elementary School. Her career spanned extraordinary change, from horses and wagons to jet aircraft, yet her purpose remained constant: helping children learn.

BOOK LEARNING AND PEOPLE LEARNING

A SCHOOL BUILT AROUND THEIR LEGACY

In 2003, the Brentwood Union School District Board of Education named Pioneer Elementary in recognition of two pioneering women, Florinne McFarlan and Rose Pierce.

The library was named in honor of Florinne, while the multi-purpose room was named for Rose Pierce and her extraordinary community service. Pioneer opened in 2004, carrying the spirit of both women into a new generation.

The schoolhouses changed. The community changed. The world changed. But the importance of a great teacher did not.

Florinne died in 1977 and is buried at Holy Cross Cemetery in Antioch. Her legacy remains in the memories of her students and in the library that carries her name.

Sources: Memories of a One-Room Schoolhouse oral history; historical Lone Tree School materials; Florinne E. "West" McFarlan family history; Brentwood Union School District naming information.