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This is the old Hayne School circa 1930s on Blue Bell Road east of Liberal.

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

They attended class in one-room schoolhouses. Some went to boarding school. Others graduated from Liberal High School, back when the addition to the brick building on Seventh Street and Lincoln Ave. was still new.

But the senior citizens who call the Cottages apartment complex home have more than memories about education. They also have questions and opinions about how students learn at modern-day schools in Liberal.

Ethel Grant, who has four grandchildren in the school system, said she's followed recent debates about the grading system, student-led prayer and the need for new facilities. For her, current events are simply part of a long, generational story.

"I went to a one-room schoolhouse until I was in the eighth grade, and then we moved to Liberal," Grant said. "My dad graduated from Liberal High School, and I graduated in 1955."

"We had fun in school," she recalled. "We had rules to go by, but we followed them. My dad probably would have killed us if we didn't — I didn't have a mother from the time I was 8, so he raised us by himself, and we learned a lot."

In those days, many things were different, said Dee Albright. She reminisced about how she walked to school, home from school, and even to nighttime events without worrying about safety.

"Sometimes, I'm scared just to walk out of my house now," she said.

Another difference: "Children had to learn manners, too," said Albright. "They don't do much of that these days."

"Well, the teachers aren't allowed to discipline like they used to, you know," Grant said. "A lot has changed. When I was in school, every morning we went into the auditorium and had a sort of prayer session. We always had prayer at the ball games, and I guess nobody thought anything about it."

All the coffee drinkers in the room shared vivid memories of a deserted Main Street on Sundays, when "pretty much everyone in town went to church," Grant said. "I could count on one hand the number of kids in my class whose families didn't go to church. Speaking from a Christian background, I think that's the breakdown right there."

Jane Jones, a retired teacher, said she worries that students no longer have to respect the American flag.

"We used to say the Pledge of Allegiance every day," she said. "I don't even know if they have flags in the classrooms."

Apart from concerns about societal changes, the seniors interviewed had questions about the way education takes place on a daily basis. Jones said she's dubious about the value of competency-based grading.

"I definitely have opinions," she said. "I do not like that new grading system, with taking tests, and if you don't pass, you get to go back and do it over again. I think kids don't have responsibility for studying."

Tests, she said, "ought to show something, show what the kids are learning. If they get to go back and take it again, that's nice for them, but we need to see what progress they're making in classes."

Albright wondered if the new system was due in part to a lack of family involvement. In her work as a teacher's aide in Houston, decades ago, she noticed that "it's the kids whose parents work with them that do well," she said. "The school can't make up for families who don't value education."

Joe Baier attended high school "when the girls had to take home-ec, and the boys all took vocational-agriculture, and we had to learn how to raise animals, how to butcher them, all of that," he recalled.

Though his description of a small-town high school might sound quaint to modern students, Baier's education was revolutionary for his family.

"My dad didn't read. He went to school three days in his whole life," he said. "But he farmed and he raised eight kids and fed us all, and every one of us graduated from the same high school."

Though he attended college, Joe dropped out after observing unfair grading practices in his science class.

"I worked my tail off and had a C," he recalled. "The football player next to me, he never even opened his book and they gave him an A. I said, 'That's enough for me,' and I went back to farm with my dad."

A fan of GED certificates, Jones said she isn't convinced that all high school graduates should be encouraged to attend college.

"They're encouraging a lot of the kids to go to college, and they're making it sound like the only thing to do. They're not making room for people who want to graduate from high school and then go to work," she said. "What happens to our work force when everybody thinks they have to be higher educated?"

When asked if the world today is different, requiring people to hold degrees in order to earn a living wage, Jones replied, "Yes. We attended classes," and everyone at the coffee hour burst into laughter.

Grant shared a story about playing hooky in high school.

"We went to Teen Town on Main Street, across from where the library is now, and here walked in Mr. Malin, the principal," she said. "He asked us what we were doing, and we said we needed a coffee break. I don't know what we were thinking."

Though she enjoys looking back on the LHS class of 1955, and peers who found success without going on to college, Grant said it's important not to generalize about students or

teaching methods.

"A lot of the kids then went to Fort Hays State or Goodwell, but if you look at the class, there were a lot of successes without college," she said. "Bob Carlile was in my class, and he went on to be a successful businessman here in town. Henry Andrade ran his photography studio and did very well. You can work hard to become what you want. That's what we were taught, and that's what we did."

While debates about prayer and society and new methods will likely continue, Grant said individual initiative plays the most important role in students' lives.

"My grandson is a sophomore, and he plays on the football team, and he's in the accelerated classes, and he studies hard," she said. "You know, it just depends on the person. If they don't want to, the school will look for a way to maybe get them through. But my grandson said he's not just there for football, he's there to get a high school education, so he does study hard every night."

"It's going to be the same whether they change the grading system or not," said Grant. "If the kids want to learn, they will. If they don't, they won't."

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