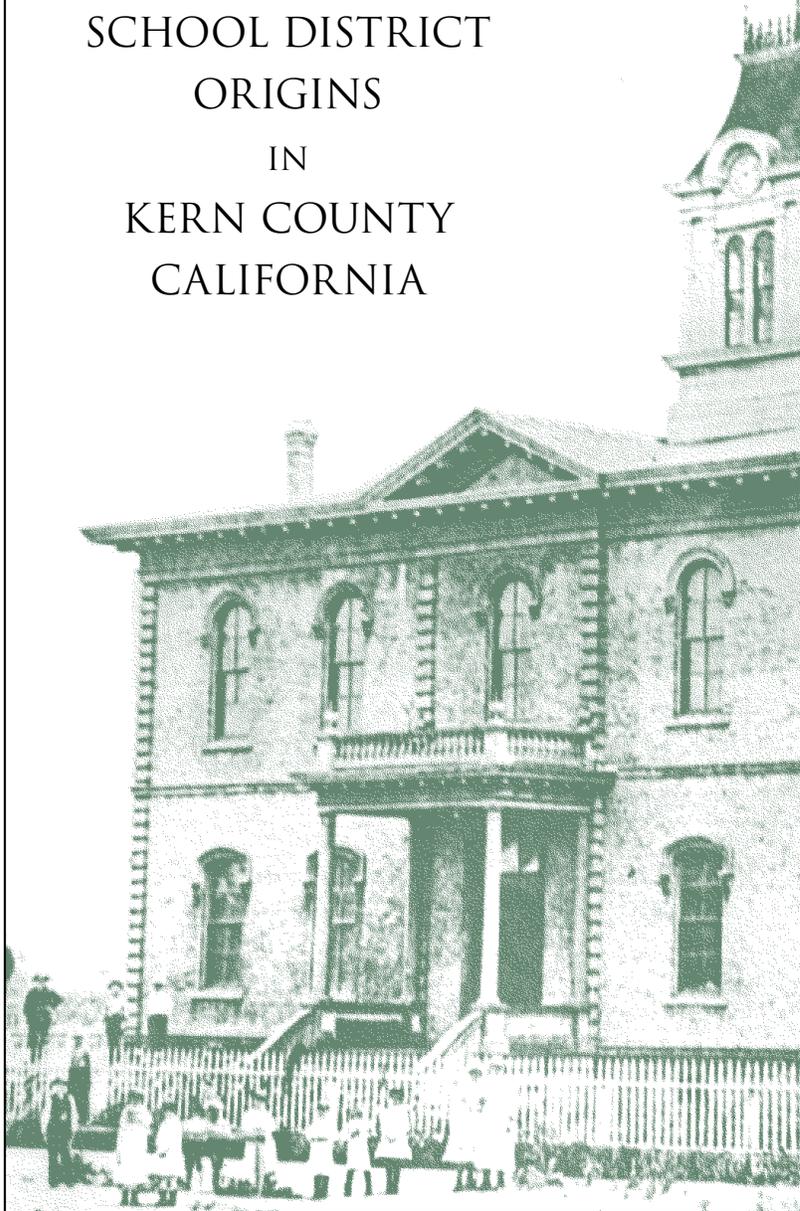


SCHOOL DISTRICT
ORIGINS
IN
KERN COUNTY
CALIFORNIA



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ARVIN UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

The first settlers in the windswept desert country near what is now the city of Arvin were the A.N. Habecker and Ralph Haven families, each settling on 440 acre plots of land in what was to become “*the colony.*” The year was 1908. The Habecker family, which included four children, was the first to move onto the land and were living in a tent when the Haven family arrived after having survived a two-day horse and buggy trip from San Bernardino.

During the winter, Ralph Haven built the first house in the new settlement and planted 10 acres of fruit trees, including Jonathan apples and Lovell peaches. When Haven’s savings ran out, he prevailed upon George Richardson and his family to move into the house and care for the orchard while he and his wife returned to San Bernardino where he had been the manager of a telephone company. The Richardsons and their son, Arvin, lived in the house for about eighteen months. When the well failed and water had to be hauled from a canal four miles away, Arvin Richardson drilled the area’s first irrigation well and, in recognition of his enterprising actions, the new settlement was named in his honor.

When the Haven family returned to Arvin in 1911, they found the J.D. Tucker family living nearby. Tucker was also from San Bernardino where he had operated a cabinet shop. His interest in raising nursery stock led to the development of the Franquette walnut and within three years, ninety acres of colony land was planted in walnut trees. At the hands of those early settlers, barren desert was gradually transformed into productive farm land and now, almost one hundred years later, little has changed in that regard. The fields that surround the city today produce a wide variety of food and fiber crops.

New families followed those original settlers and, by 1913, there were enough youngsters in the colony to warrant the establishment of a school district and the construction of a schoolhouse. **The Bear Mountain School District was formed on February 8th** of that year and the district’s first school, built at a cost of \$4,000, was completed shortly thereafter. Situated on Third Street between B and C Streets, the new Bear Mountain School was a two-room frame structure with two cloakrooms, a stage, a library, and also two summerhouses. Average daily attendance that first year was eleven students.

On **March 8, 1917, for no reason that was readily discernable, the**



district was renamed the **Arvin School District**.

Until 1920, only one of the two classrooms was used but the school was nonetheless fully utilized since it also served as the community center and meeting hall. Sliding walls between the two rooms were pushed open to accommodate large crowds and church services. For a number of years, the school was the only building of consequence in “*downtown*” Arvin.

During the next ten years, enrollment in the district grew from 16 students to 196 students and a new school was opened in 1928. It was a brick building and so much more substantial than the original school but because it, too, had only two rooms, in succeeding years additional rooms were built on to accommodate the growing student population.

By the late 1930s, the downtown area of Arvin was becoming congested and the district opted to build a new school on Haven Drive. Construction on the first six classrooms of the **Haven Drive School began in 1938**.

The Arvin district gained considerable territory in 1939 when annexations ordered by the county board of supervisors added over a hundred square miles to the district: 23 sections from Vineland School District, 17 sections from **Pershing School District**, and 56 sections from the lapsed Tejon School District. Such a large increase in territory triggered a corresponding increase in enrollment and between 1938-39 and 1948-49, average daily attendance in the district’s schools more than doubled, from 550 to 1,283.

Note: Although not in any way affiliated with the Arvin Union School District, the establishment of the Arvin Federal Emergency School bears mentioning here simply to draw a distinction between the two. During the years of the Great Depression, many Kern County school districts were heavily impacted by the arrival of thousands of migrant farm workers and their families from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas - the so-called “*Okies*”. The Arvin, Lamont, and Vineland districts were particularly affected by this heavy influx of poor, undernourished children, most having arrived with little general knowledge and few learning skills. Some districts made it painfully clear that these youngsters were not welcome in their schools and were thus delighted when, in 1940, County Superintendent of Schools Leo B. Hart was granted permission

to establish the Arvin Federal Emergency School, its specific mission being to provide an appropriate school setting for this population of “undesirables”. Hart was well aware of the unique educational needs of these children and was overwhelmingly successful in developing and implementing a unique curriculum to meet those needs.

The story of the development and success of what was generally referred to as the Weedpatch School is beautifully told in a book titled, *Children of the Dustbowl*, by Jerry Stanley.

The Indian School District, which served the few remaining Yokuts children living on the San Sebastian Indian Reservation, was annexed to the Arvin School District **in 1949**. Established in 1920, enrollment in the Indian School’s tiny one-room schoolhouse peaked at seventeen students in 1923 and just thirteen students were enrolled at the time of the annexation. Consolidation of the two districts resulted in the formation of the **Arvin Union School District** and increased the size of the district to 309 square miles, the great bulk of which is uninhabited farm or range land.

Average daily attendance at the time that Arvin became a union district was 1,428 students. A period of moderate decline followed and by 1961-62, the district enrollment had slipped to 1,301, a figure that remained reasonably steady for many years to follow.

In the past twenty years Arvin, not unlike other agricultural communities in the San Joaquin Valley, has experienced a significant increase in population due largely to a heavy influx of Hispanic farm worker families moving into the area. In 2006, Arvin had an enrollment of approximately 3,200 students and 96% of those youngsters were Hispanic.

The Arvin district operates four schools: Sierra Vista School, Bear Mountain School, and El Camino Real Elementary School all serve youngsters in grades K-6. Haven Drive School is a traditional 7th and 8th grade junior high. **Sierra Vista opened in the 1960s** and was exclusively an elementary school although Haven Drive continued to house some of the upper elementary grades. When **Bear Mountain School opened in 1992**, Haven Drive then became exclusively a middle school, serving students in grades 6-8. With the opening of El Camino Real School, all district elementary schools began serving students in grades K-6. At one



LEO B HART

time operated another elementary school, Meridian School, located at the south end of the district, but it was closed in 1974.

During the 1988-89 school year, some upgrading of classrooms was accomplished at all existing school sites using funds from the state modernization program.

Funds for construction of the El Camino Real School became available following a successful ~~\$5,059,000~~ bond election held in March of 2004.

Since 1969 the district has also operated Arvin State Pre-School, a program designed to prepare pre-schoolers for the kindergarten experience. Eligibility for participation in this program, currently licensed to accommodate 138 children, is based on family income.

Just five superintendents have headed up operations in the Arvin Union School District since 1957: Walter Hill from 1957 to 1968, Dennis Butterfield from 1968 to 1972, John Davis from 1972-1992, Mike McGuire from 1992 to 2002, Kenneth Bergevin from 2002 to June of 2007 and Jerelle Kavanaugh, formerly the district's assistant superintendent, who served until June of 2010. ■