



Anita Wolbrueck Rode is believed to be the oldest living person who attended both the old woodframe Jonah School building built in the mid 1880s and the new one constructed in 1922.

Joyce May

Saving the school house

Small farming community rallies to preserve historic structure

BY JOYCE MAY

In the early 1920s, the trustees of Jonah School knew the wood frame schoolhouse that had served the district some 40 years could not hold the growing student body for much longer.

Attendance had ballooned to more than 200 children, prompting school officials to have blue-

prints drawn up for a new building.

The men had great foresight, but they could not have known the Great Flood of 1921 would come and hasten their plans.

The waters of the San Gabriel filled the old school building, but spared it the fate of a church, a bridge, and, as Anita Rode recalls, an African-American schoolhouse in the area which all washed away.

Ms. Rode is believed to be the only living person who attended both the old wood frame Jonah School building, constructed in the mid-1880s,

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Photos by Joyce May

Above, Carolyn Endsley, board president of Jonah Community Inc. stands in a former classroom turned meeting room at the Jonah Community Center. The building was converted to a community center in the early 1970s and has hosted assorted social events including wedding receptions, reunions, potluck dinners, church meetings and the popular Jonah Community Center chili supper.

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and the new building constructed in 1922.

Born September 23, 1913, she was just shy of 9 and one of 219 students on the roll when classes began at the old school in Fall 1922.

Ms. Rode is an astoundingly independent 99-year-old. She lives on her own, although her nephew is nearby, prepares her own simple meals, and crochets regularly. A full day of activities may wear her out, but her mind is clear and focused.

Ms. Rode said she remembers well the first day in the new Jonah School building. It was January 6, 1923, the students' first day back from Christmas vacation.

"We all got our own desks, and each room had 20 or 24 desks. They were high. We were proud," Ms. Rode said. "In the old school, we had to sit two to a desk."

The Jonah School building was a simple but sturdy structure. It had no electricity and no indoor bathrooms. It would be 1936, another 13 years, before electrical power would make it to Jonah. No one is for sure when the outhouses were replaced with indoor toilets.

Ms. Rode remembers a water fountain in the hallway and big pot-belly stoves in the corner of the rooms that burned coal for heat. Air conditioning meant opening a window.

There were no yellow school buses transporting the kids to school.

Ms. Rode lived five miles from Jonah School and getting there meant riding a horse or walking.

The teachers at the time boarded at the home of C.G. Holmstrom and would walk to and from school just as the children did, Ms. Rode recalled.

"When we walked, we had more fun. The children were German, Swede and Czech, and we would all try to say our numbers in the others' language. It would always sound so crazy," said Ms. Rode, who is of German descent. Her maiden name is Wolbrueck.

Her family lived the farthest from the school, and on occasion, a Mr. Honeycutt, who owned a Model T Ford, would give her and her siblings a ride as far as he lived.

"Sometimes it was pretty blooming cold," Ms. Rode said.

Changing times

The 1930s saw the beginning of the gradual decline in Jonah's population. The Great Depression took its toll on the community, as did innovations in farm equipment, which lessened the demand for farm workers.

As more people left the area, high school students were routed to Georgetown.

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Anita Wolbrueck Rode
Former student at Jonah School

Carl Lidell, known endearingly as "Mr. Jonah" is a former Williamson County Commissioner and founding member of the Jonah Water Supply Corporation.

Davidson, Walker, Holmstrom, Kotrla, Percy and Johnson are other family names with long ties to Jonah.

The future

Like its early trustees, members of Jonah Community Inc. are looking to the future. They hope to one day offer English as a Second Language and GED courses, nutrition classes and possibly build a community garden at the facility.

"The community is changing. In 10 years, there may be a greater population out here," Ms. Endsley said.

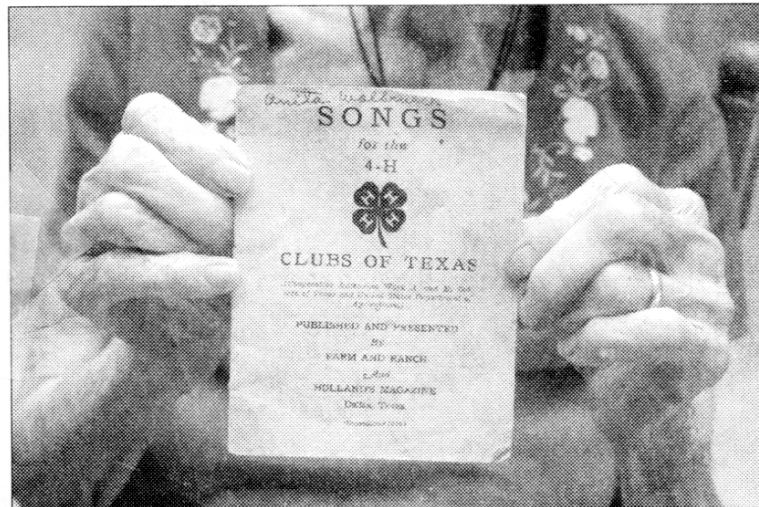
Members are also planning to renovate the building in phases and have been working with architect David Voelter since the spring.

Larry Myers, an electrical and mechanical engineer, has come on board as a consultant and James Ropolo is serving as consulting contractor.

The group is currently working on estimates for restoring the auditorium to its original size, relocating the bathrooms and restoring several rooms that are in disrepair.

The group receives no assistance from the state or county and is looking into grants, contemplating fundraisers and seeking donations from individuals and corporate entities to meet the cost.

"It may not have another 90 years of life, but we hope it will last much longer than if it was left to its own," Ms. Endsley said.



Anita Wolbrueck Rode holds a copy of the 4-H pamphlet she used when she was a student at Jonah School. The 99-year-old Jonah area resident is believed to be the oldest living person who attended both the old woodframe Jonah School building built in the mid-1880s and the new one constructed in 1922.

The school slowly shrank from offering 11 grades to only offering grades one through six. By 1971, it was decided that Jonah Common School District would be divided among Granger, Taylor, Hutto and Georgetown school districts.

The building and the 2.5 acres of land it sits on were deeded to the newly created Jonah Community Inc., which continues to oversee it as a community center.

Carolyn Endsley serves as president of Jonah Community Inc.

She has lived in the Jonah area for 35 years and likes to think of the building as the hub of the little community located nine miles east of Georgetown.

"We feel like the building really has good bones, so to speak," Ms. Endsley said.

A self-described lover of history and a member of the Williamson Museum,

she combed through school board minutes, county records and other historical documents, books and publications to compile a history of the Jonah School building.

"To me, it is kind of like putting a puzzle together," she said. "History is something you either like or you don't. I am on the really like it side."

One of the things that still puzzles her about the Jonah School building is how prominent Austin architect Hugo Franz Kuehne, whose designs are stamped on hundreds of homes and public buildings, including the first Austin Public Library building, came to be the architect for the small, rural project. Mr. Kuehne held degrees from the University of Texas at Austin and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and helped found the architecture department at UT in 1910.

"He wanted not necessarily fancy, but really sturdy, usable structures for general public use," Ms. Endsley said. "I still don't know who knew him or how he got to be a part of [the Jonah School project]. I guess one of our trustees knew somebody who knew somebody."

Many of the names connected with Jonah School are still recognizable in the area, Ms. Endsley said.

Williamson County Judge Dan Gattis' grandfather was a trustee at the time of the new building construction.