

BILOXI SCHOOLS

1930-1939

The Biloxi Schools In The 1930s

Biloxi – Population, 1930 Census – 14,850

Mayor, 1930 – John J. Kennedy

City Council, 1930 – M.L. Michel, John D. Swanzy

Superintendent, Biloxi Public Schools – A.L. May, 1922-1934
G.W. Ditto, 1934-1946

Biloxi School Board –

- 1930 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer,
Mrs. Anna Heidenheim
- 1931 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly,
Dr. L.W. Hood
- 1932 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly,
Dr. L.W. Hood
- 1933 – E.L. Dukate, L.W. Hood, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager,
M.H. Dees
- 1934 – E.L. Dukate, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, Dr. L.W. Hood,
Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager, M.H. Dees
- 1935 – E.L. Dukate, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, Dr. L.W. Hood,
Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager, M.H. Dees
- 1936 – L.W. Hood, M.H. Dees, Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager,
Rev. E.A. DeMiller
- 1937 – Rev. E.A. DeMiller, William Cruso, Mrs. Fred Quint, Frank P. Corso,
Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager
- 1938 – Rev. E.A. DeMiller, William Cruso, Mrs. Fred Quint, Frank P. Corso,
C.S. Wentzell
- 1939 – Rev. E.A. DeMiller, William Cruso, Mrs. Fred Quint, C.S. Wentzell,
Fred Ferson

Student Enrollment in 1930-1931, reported in first week – 2,624

Total Budget, Biloxi Public Schools, for 1930-1931 – \$101,243.79

III. THE BILOXI SCHOOLS – 1930 –1939

It was fortunate for the school system that the 1920s had brought expanded physical facilities to Biloxi—new and well-equipped schools—because the 1930s were years of depression throughout Mississippi as elsewhere in the country. *The Daily Herald* in 1934, for instance, noted that delinquent tax sale notices had grown to several pages. At one point, some Biloxians remember, teachers were paid in scrip, which was sometimes redeemed by businessmen at less than face value, though the city's credit generally remained good.

According to School Board Minutes of January 23, 1931, there were 1,227 boys and 1,223 girls attending Biloxi schools—total enrollment, 2,450. The high school had 420 students. A review of the chart provided to the Board shows 589 students attending first grade, with the number of students decreasing every year in successive grade levels. Though dropouts and transfers may account for some less startling decreases in number from grade two through grade twelve, it is a matter of speculation as to why the enrollment in second grade classes repeatedly shows a dramatic decrease of more than forty percent compared with first grade enrollment. Although it is probable that the matter was of more than passing concern to administrators and Board members, no adequate explanation seems to have been made.

The revised *Biloxi City Schools Rules and Regulations*, published in 1929-1930, governed the operation of the school district at the beginning of this decade. Although the manual was produced over seventy years ago, much of what is included might well be found in schools today. A remarkable effort was made to direct the teaching and learning process in the schools by providing specific guidance for staff members. It is instructive, however, to note some significant differences.

It seems almost incredible, with the unbelievably small salaries paid to teachers, that Biloxi required its teachers to attend "some good summer school or university standing [*sic*] one year out of every three and spend six weeks doing credit work in three major subjects or take seven quarter hours, same to be filed with the superintendent prior to the opening of school" (*Manual and Course of Study* 13). It seems equally incredible that some of the teachers, given their limited salaries, were able to take advantage of the Board's approving their traveling abroad in special programs that would meet this requirement or receiving permission to delay the required college attendance because of such travel. In addition to the stringent requirements placed on all teachers, they were required by Mississippi law to take a school census each year.

Qualifications for high school teachers, as noted earlier, were higher than those for elementary teachers. An applicant for an elementary teaching position was required to have a minimum of two years of training in a standard normal school or university; a high school teacher was required to be a graduate of a standard college or university (*Manual and Course of Study* 9).

Sections of the manual deal in a straightforward no-nonsense way with attendance, discipline, and dress. For example, "wearing of knickers by school girls is prohibited in the schools." (*Manual*, p. 13) And "no pupil will be promoted who does not make an average of 70 percent *in department* [italics mine] for the session" (*Manual and Course of Study* 14) Obviously students received numerical grades for classroom and school behavior.

The grading process for the Biloxi schools stated that "An average of 70 percent is required for passing. Pupils in the high school will be required to make an average of at least 60 during the last term of any semester." (*Manual*, p. 9) The requirement in regard to the passing grade for the last term of any semester was established, no doubt, to ensure that students with high averages during the early terms could not with impunity simply do little or nothing in the last term and still pass. That philosophy extended long into the future for the Biloxi schools as administrators and Board members wrestled with the old questions centered in grading practices.

A person reading the rules under which the Biloxi schools operated in this decade might understandably react negatively to some of the tougher and more arbitrary regulations. Teachers were cautioned that students could make up work following absences but that such work rarely equaled in value the class work done at the scheduled time. Not less than thirty minutes of instruction was required for every period "lost." The make-up work was to be completed in the eighth period, and teachers, when assigning grades, should take into consideration the attitude of the students toward the privilege of making up work.

No presents could be received by teachers; no showers, Christmas trees, or like celebrations were allowed; every teacher was required to get a Palmer's Certificate in writing or the equivalent within three years after employment (students were taught to write by using the Palmer Method); students who continued to fail in their work were to be returned to the grade below if, in the opinion of the superintendent, failure was due to insufficient preparation; and children were not allowed to enter the school yard until the ringing of the bell at 8:30. (When it was cold or raining, they could enter the basement.)

Chapel for elementary students was conducted from 8:45 to 9:00, with class work beginning at 9:00. Students who failed final examinations were not allowed to retake the examination and were required to take the course again or to make it up in summer school. Immediate suspension followed a list of offenses, including the usual vandalism and truancy. In addition, a list of "acts of dishonor" was presented, with the admonition that the student would be subject to suspension or expulsion. Such matters as asking for or receiving aid in recitation or examination, reciting from forbidden paper or using in the school an inter-linear translation of any language taught in the school, language or conduct unbecoming to a lady or a gentleman in the school building, on the school grounds, or on the streets, street car or other public conveyance coming to or returning from school—these were among those forbidden acts.

During the 1930s, in addition to those Board members who were serving in 1929, a number of appointments brought other Biloxians into positions where their decisions as Board members would profoundly affect all the students and the faculty of the Biloxi schools. At one time or another during this decade Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, Dr. L.W. Hood, Mrs. Noretta Lopez Yeager, Mr. M.H. Dees, Reverend E.A. DeMiller, Mr. William Cruso, Mrs. Fred Quint, Mr. Frank P. Corso, Mr. C.S. Wentzell, and Mr. Fred Ferson served as Board members.

In May 1931 *The Daily Herald* gave special coverage to the Biloxi schools in articles centered in the curriculum, high school graduation, School Board officers, and Parent-Teacher Associations. The newspaper reported on the courses of study that had been revised under the direction of Superintendent A.L. May, updating objectives and methods. "Each course of study in the school system is composed of the following elements: 1. Aims and objectives. 2. Methods of procedure and suggested activities. 3. Probable outcomes. 4. List of books and supplies. 5. Work divided according to the promotion periods of the system. 6. Bibliography" ("Advantages of Study Courses" 2).

In the courses of study, committee members, according to the *Herald*, were trying to help students learn things they would need to know when they took their places in a world outside school. "The school is attempting to do as Dr. Briggs of Columbia University says, 'each the child to do the things better that he will do anyway'" ("Advantages" 2).

The upper departmental grades in the elementary schools have been made more practical. The eighth grade students have studied vocational guidance and have become very much interested in the different occupations and industries. One eighth grade class made and equipped a miniature house. These students have learned a great deal concerning the necessity of being prepared to do a particular line of work as well as to wisely select their high school course.

In the high school every phase of high school work is covered. If a student is planning to go to college the college preparatory course may be taken. If a student is not planning to go to college the commercial or home economics course may be taken. The school is no longer being operated strictly to prepare students for college. Around 50 percent of the Biloxi High School graduates go to college. It is also attempting to do something for the other 50 percent that do not go to college. ("Advantages" 2)

Among noteworthy changes in the school curriculum in the past few years was the restructuring of the physical education program. Up to this time, physical education had been offered only in conjunction with athletics in football and basketball. It had been decided by the administration and Board that it was even more necessary to provide physical education for students who were not as strong and healthy as the athletes, and physical education was now being offered to every student from first grade through twelfth. Annual health examinations were given and health inspections

made daily, with special teachers being assigned to this work. The Biloxi schools participated in all major sports. The superintendent and the Board emphasized that, while athletics might occupy a prominent part in school life, there was no over-emphasis on sports. "Only those students who are passing their literary work and in deportment are permitted to represent the school in interscholastic athletics. This includes the elementary schools as well as the high school," the *Herald* reported ("Advantages" 3).

A separate article in the same issue of the *Herald* described an extensive and well-planned music program in the schools. That Biloxians provided the best basic education for their children they could provide was evident in the curricular restructuring underway. That they also desired more for their children than the basic curriculum was evident in the music program. Perhaps Biloxians, as a community, had always expressed their love of music more openly than other Mississippi cities had. In close proximity to Mobile and New Orleans, other cities whose cultural life was highlighted by a love of music, Biloxi was widely known for its celebrations which always included music of some kind.

The Biloxi schools for more than ten years had offered a full music program under the direction of a music supervisor. Music was taught in first through eighth grades, with glee club (choir) music taught in the high school. This course included music appreciation. Approximately 275 elementary students had recently participated in a commencement presentation of the operetta, "Paul Revere's Ride." A music teacher was part of every school faculty, and both instrumental music and string music were being taught in every school. "All of the schools have a good orchestra. Some of the orchestras have as many as 40 members," the *Herald* reported. In addition, the school band, made up of both elementary and high school students, had about 50 members, and piano was taught in the high school. Music was part of school life as an almost routine matter, though the highly developed program offered by the Biloxi schools seems extraordinary in retrospect.

The May 21, 1931, issue of *The Daily Herald* also carried a statement by longtime School Board member W.F. Gorenflo, president of the Board and member of a Biloxi family whose donations and services to the Biloxi schools were honored in the school bearing the family name.

"Back beyond the time when it was customary to give diplomas or even have a graduating class and before Biloxi had a high school," he said, "I was appointed a member of the School Board." For twenty-five years he had served as either president or secretary of the Board. When diplomas were first awarded, it had been Mr. Gorenflo's pleasant duty to sign them and later as president to award them to the graduating seniors.

"I have observed with a great and growing satisfaction the increase in number as well as advanced education of the graduates. As the system grew in size, so did the number and quality of the class, until today we have the largest and best in the history of Biloxi," he noted. There had been 91 students in the class at the beginning of the year. Eighty were expected to graduate; six would

graduate at the end of summer school; two had moved; one had dropped out; and five would be returning for the next school session ("School Board Head" 3).

For the 1930-1931 school session, the Biloxi elementary schools had been rated by the County Accrediting Commission in such areas as premises, equipment, teachers, administration, and "extra scores," which included musical instruments, bulletin boards, lunch equipment, free bulletins, work rooms, microscope, examinations by nurses and physician, health posts, and something called "monthly weighing."

It comes as no surprise to find that in almost every instance, the scores given by the local county group were perfect, though it does seem somewhat surprising to see that total scores in every school always exceed the possible grand total listed. There are very few variances in scores awarded for teachers in such areas as education, professional training, professional attitude, and teaching ability; Howard II teachers, however, received the highest total score.

An interesting and little-known fact about vocational education in the United States is noted in a Diversified Occupations and Distributive Education handbook published by the school system in 1947. It noted that the kind of vocational education integrated with public schools was conceived by a small group of vocational leaders in 1933 meeting at the Buena Vista Hotel that summer.

A bulletin in the Vocational Series prepared by the State Board of Vocational Education notes that M.D. Broadfoot, State Supervisor of Trade and Industrial Education in Mississippi; George H. Fern, State Supervisor of T&I Education in Texas; W.J. Breit, State Supervisor of T&I Education in Arkansas; George E. Wallace, Conference Leader from Tuscaloosa, Alabama; W.M. Covington, local supervisor, Vicksburg, Mississippi; and C.E. Rakestraw, federal agent, met in conference at the Buena Vista.

"The plan visualized by these men materialized into a reality and has grown to the point of wide adoption and use in scores of communities in a large number of states," the handbook notes. The vocational education programs were made possible through the George-Deen Act of 1936, followed by the George-Barden Act of 1946, and sponsored by the state office of vocational education (*DO and DE Handbook*).

In 1934 the citizens of the Mississippi Gulf Coast could read about Biloxi schools in a special edition of *The Daily Herald*, called *The Fiftieth Anniversary Souvenir Golden Jubilee Number*. The edition included pictures of several men who were important to the schools during the middle years—George W. Ditto, who was superintendent; A.E. Scruggs, principal of the high school, later to become superintendent; and William Bennett Pearson, teacher of commercial subjects.

An article covering the school system contained information about each of the schools and about enrollment and faculty.

With understandable pride, the *Herald* reporter reviewed the city's accomplishments in building the new high school in 1912, first school to be built under a city bond issue, at a cost of \$50,000 on grounds donated by the Howard family; Lopez Elementary School, replacing the old West End school; Dukate, meeting needs of students in the east section of the city; Gorenflo, replacing the old Back Bay school; Howard No. 2, erected in 1928 at a cost of \$82,000, according to the article, and built on the site formerly occupied by a frame structure; Howard No. 1, the only frame ward school still in use; and the colored school on Nixon Street, which was, in what must clearly have been overstatement, "now in excellent repair and under the same supervision as the white schools" (*Fiftieth Anniversary* 84).

All of the Biloxi schools, the *Herald* noted, were fully accredited, the high school by the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of Southern States, as well as by the state association, and the elementary schools with grade "A" accreditation by the state. And the article continued:

The present enrollment (October 31, 1934) is 2,569, the largest enrollment ever had at this time of year, and will increase, possibly by 500, before the year is over. Teachers are carefully selected as to training and experience; they attend summer schools periodically, thus keeping abreast with progress in educational circles. The schools are ably supported by Parent-Teacher Associations in each school and a central P.T.A. Council assists in keeping extracurricular activities in each school on a similar footing and progressing. The School Board, appointed by City Commissioners, is composed of E.L. Dukate, president; Dr. L.W. Hood, vice-president; Mrs. Dora P. Gilly, secretary; Mrs. Norita Lopez Yerger; and M.H. Dees. George Ditto is superintendent; A.E. Scruggs is principal of the high school; Miss Margaret Speir of Dukate; Miss Helena Brander of Lopez; Miss Ethel Arguelles of Howard No. 1; Miss Alma Ritch of Gorenflo; and Miss Delphine Holloway of Howard No. 2. M.F. Nichols is principal of the colored school. There are 46 elementary teachers, 20 high school teachers, which includes coaches, part-time music teachers, principals and superintendent; there are 10 colored teachers and an irregular number of substitute teachers. (*Fiftieth Anniversary* 84)

It is impossible to review this decade in the history of the Biloxi schools without giving more than passing attention to finances. A review of School Board minutes will quickly reveal how the topic drove Board meetings during this period. Salaries were pathetically low and resources were limited even more than in the past.

The Depression brought with it a gradual decrease in the budget for the schools, in the face of a growing student population.

YEARS	TOTAL BUDGET
1930-1931	\$101,243.79
1931-1932	\$102,889.55
1932-1933	\$ 77,544.21
1933-1934	\$ 61,000.00
1934-1935	\$ 73,929.50
1936-1937	\$ 80,806.00
1939	\$ 98,969.66.

Most of the information available about the Biloxi schools during the 1930s is centered in the white student population. And most of the business conducted by the School Board and recorded in the School Board Minutes dealt with the white schools. Scant attention seemed to be paid to the Biloxi Colored School. (Author's Note: The use of the term "colored" throughout the early history of the Biloxi schools is in keeping with historical references, which consistently refer to the "colored schools" and the "colored students." No attempt has been made, therefore, to change the phrasing.)

The Biloxi Colored School was under the supervision of Professor Marshall F. Nichols, who was named principal in 1916. (See *"Biographies" Section presented later.*) Years afterward, in an interview conducted in connection with an oral history project, Mrs. Fannie Nichols referred to the school with precise wording as "that old broken down building on Nixon Street."

It was characteristic of Mr. Nichols that he would see both the difficulties and the opportunities of his new position, moving very quickly to add grades to the heretofore ninth grade school, with the first tenth graders graduating only a few years after his arrival and the first twelfth grade class graduating in 1935. Through his interest in and knowledge of agriculture, he added a number of extracurricular programs centered in agriculture and also expanded other co-curricular programs. It would take the community another twenty years after Professor Nichols became principal to provide new facilities for his students.

The student enrollment and attendance figures for 1936-1937 as presented to the Board showed a growing population:

Grade 1 – 477	Grade 2 – 268	Grade 3 – 310	Grade 4 – 283
Grade 5 – 241	Grade 6 – 255	Grade 7 – 207	Grade 8 – 193

Largest of the elementary schools, with a student population of 455, was Howard II; smallest, with a population of 319, was Howard I. Enrollment in the Biloxi Colored School, grades one through eight, totaled 347. The chart showed a total of 485 white high school students (grades 9-12) and 54 colored students (only two years after the first twelfth grade graduating class at the school). Average daily attendance in the schools ranged from 90 percent at Biloxi Colored School to 98.09 percent at Howard I.

Total enrollment in the Biloxi schools for 1936-1937 was 2,773.

The Biloxi schools continued to offer students a wide variety of curricular and extracurricular programs. (Pictured – *Biloxi High School Band in 1939.*) In 1937, the high school published a school newspaper ("The Beacon Glow") and a yearbook ("The Crimson Quill"). (Copies of the 1937-1938, 1938-1939, and 1939-1940 yearbooks are presently



housed in the Genealogy and History section of the Biloxi Library.) The pictures show students in the Pep Squad, the band, the Honor Society, the Museum Club, sports teams, and choral and drama activities.

Although it was not then a part of the Biloxi school district, the Fernwood school served students who attended Biloxi schools for grades 9-12. An unpublished Works Progress Administration report describes the Fernwood School:

Fernwood is one of the large rural schools with a separate school district, located on the old Pass Christian Road midway between Handsboro and Edgewater Gulf Course. It is housed in an excellent modern brick building with attractive landscaped grounds. It employs six teachers who are among the highest paid of any of the rural schools of Harrison County. Salaries are paid the teachers through twelve months of the year, and this district with the exception of Mississippi City has more money than any separate rural district. In 1915 its assessed valuation was more than \$200,000 with a levy of 5 mills on taxable property.

The school district of Fernwood comprises 'all that part of section 20-21-22-23-24 lying south of Back Bay of Biloxi, and all of sections 25-26-27-28-29-30-31-32-33-34-35-36, all in Township 7-S, R. 10-W. with the schoolhouse located at the present location of Fernwood Public School in section 29.'

Owing to higher taxes paid in this district, this school is said to be in excellent financial condition and teachers are paid promptly and adequately. Eight grades are taught and the High School pupils in this district are transported to Biloxi in regular school truck.

The community of Fernwood is built up around its excellent school, although there are attractive homes and small pecan farms adjacent to the school property. South on the beach on Highway 90 is the Fernwood Tourist Camp with attractive Spanish type cottages set back among moss-hung oaks that once comprised a part of the old DeBuys estate. These cottages are modern in every respect and are among the popular camps along the beach front between Gulfport and Biloxi. (Jean Walsh, "Fernwood," 1937, 1, 2)

It is noteworthy that top administrative offices in the Biloxi schools during the entire decade of the 1930s reflected remarkable stability. Mr. A.L. May resigned as superintendent on July 14, 1934, and was succeeded by high school principal George W. Ditto. Mr. A.E. Scruggs then became principal of the high school, a position he was to hold until July 25, 1944.

Principals of all the other schools during this period remained constant: Miss Margaret Speir, Dukate; Miss Ethel Arguelles, Howard No. 1; Miss Helena Brander, Lopez; Miss Delphine Holloway, Howard No. 2; Miss Alma Ritch, Gorenflo; and Mr. M.F. Nichols, Biloxi Colored School. (See "*Biographies*" Section.)

The decade of 1930-1939 would end with the nation struggling to find its way out of the Depression only to be faced with a new threat. On September 8, 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared

a state of national emergency. It was the prelude to war—and the beginning of enormous changes that would affect Biloxi and the country in countless ways.



The Beacon Glow Staff - 1939



Pictured from Top to Bottom – Junior, Sophomore, and Freshman Classes - Biloxi High School - 1939