

*History*  
*and*  
*Memories*

**Years 1919-1972**

**Researched and written by  
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**History and Memories**  
of  
**Our Beloved School**  
**Mineral Springs Jr. High School**  
**Watson, Alabama**

This is the story of the beginning and the ending of our beloved school, Mineral Springs Jr. High School. The school was started in the small community of Mineral Springs for the purpose of educating children of coal miners. The postal service had the community listed as Watson, Alabama, and some of the residence who lived there have told us it was named after the first postman, Mr. Watson.

Much of the information we have gathered over the past six years has come from the Southern History Department of the Birmingham Public Library, the Jefferson County Board of Education and also students who attended the schools. Unfortunately, the Board of Education was able to give us only limited information. Records were just not kept or are lost.

There were **two** schools, the first being called "The Old Mineral Springs School", which was located in the Jew Hollow mining camp. The second school was the stucco building that we all remember. Even today, (8/4/09) so many of the students are no longer with us. Just a couple years ago we lost the last of the students who attended the first school in Jew Hollow.

The little community of Mineral Springs still stands today, but one would never know it was once a booming mining camp. The community is located just west of the Gardendale City limits, past the Soccer Fields on Fieldstown Road. The Post Office and grocery store are still popular landmarks today.

Early history tells us the demand for coal was increasing in Jefferson County in the late 1800's. People were using coal for heat instead of the usual wood. Other uses for coal were pressing. Research shows that Mineral Springs Coal Mines was opened in the 1880's. These mines were probably operated by one of the largest companies, The Pratt Coal and Coke Mining Company. The company was named for Daniel Pratt, who financed the start of mining in this area.

In those days, the cold company would set up a village and build small houses for the miners and their families to rent. The miners would pay the company rent and the rent was always taken from their payday. All the homes had the same floor plan, which was 4 rooms with a back porch. Some had running water on the porch. The superintendent was housed in a larger house with indoor plumbing. Most of the time his house was located on a hill so he could oversee the village. The company would



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also build a common building which was used for church worship and also a school. Other community activities were also carried on in this building. As for the church, a number of different dominations would alternate worship from Sunday to Sunday. However, all taught the Word of God. We believe a common building of this type was the situation at Mineral Springs and was where the "Old Mineral Springs School" began. The company employed an instructor and children from within the camp and the surrounding areas came to learn. Mr. Rufus Franklin, with education limited to home studies, was the educator and he taught all ages. He was paid to teach by the mining company. Students would walk several miles to reach school and some even walked the railroad tracks.

The village is described as having a depot, post office, skating rink, commissary and a dry goods store. A railroad track ran through the mining camp so the coal could be transported out. Three Jewish families owned the dry goods store. They were: The Gordons, Kronenbergs and Levowitzs. These families routinely followed the seams of coal and the mining companies in order to sell their goods. This is how the name of the mining camp became known as Jew Hollow. (There is still a sign on Fieldstown Road that reads "Jew Hollow Road"). In talking to students who went to school there, or had parents attending, they refer to the school as the "Old Mineral Springs School at Jew Hollow". Education continued there until the mining company completed the job of getting black gold out of the ground. Then the company moved on, following another seam of coal.

It is believed the Pratt Company went toward Brookside and some of the miners followed them. Others went to work in the Republic Mines, which was only a few miles away. This was about the year 1920 and the Republic Mines were owned by Republic Coal and Iron Company. They were following the Warrior field seam of coal.

We do not know if the Jefferson County Board of Education was ever in control of the school at Jew Hollow or not. In addition to educator Rufus Franklin, we know that Professor Ira Robins and Professor J.F. Jackson taught there. Ira Robins was there as early as 1904. Ethel C. Pinyan could remember the automobile Mr. Jackson drove. It seems as if the coal company deserted the school when they moved on to a new area.

We do know the County was actively involved in Mineral's education by the years 1919-1920. We have a copy of the Annual Report filed by the Board of Education for those years and it states there were four faculty members at the school. This leads us to believe this report is for



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the new school. Names of the faculty were: Mr. J. F. Jackson, Mrs. J.F. Jackson, Era Mae MacRae and Lucille Bennett. Mr. Jackson was principal. For the year 1920-1921 there were 189 students enrolled. There is no mention of the instructor, Mr. Rufus Franklin at this time. Is it possible he followed the moving of the coal mines, also?

We interviewed Mrs. Thelma Minyard in 2004 and at that time she was the only surviving student we could find who attended the first school. Since that time, Mrs. Minyard has passed away. She gave us very important history of the school, which we would not know about otherwise. One of her most cherished memories of the school took place when the principal lined all the pupils up and marched them up to the ball diamond, which was already in existence on the site of the new building. There he told the students they were about to receive a new school, which is the same one we all loved. The baseball diamond had been a community playing field. The community always had a baseball team and was considered a very entertaining portion of their lives. The new school would be situated on 5 acres of land. There would be plenty room for the kids to play.

We also had the opportunity to interview Raymond Vines about this same time. Raymond's mother, Nettie Brake, attended the first school and she passed lots of stories and photos on to Raymond. All the class photos we have that are made outside The Jew Hollow School came by way of Raymond's mom. Raymond passed away a few years ago and we are so thankful he shared these photos with us. She told of the Sorensen Family, who originally came from Denmark. Mr. Sorensen followed the cold mines since he was a blacksmith and he also built coal cars that transported the coal in and out of the mines. His oldest sons, John and Tony, enrolled at the Jew Hollow School and they could not speak or understand English. They would sit quietly in class and had a hard time trying to figure out what was being taught. At recess, the two would get together in the corner or beneath a tree and just clatter away to one another. Meanwhile, the rest of the students were trying to figure out what they were talking about.

After the students were moved to the new school, the old building at Jew Hollow stood vacant. We know from previous research on the Hand Family that Mr. Hand used lumber from the old school to add on to his existing small house in Fieldstown. Mr. and Mrs. Hand located in Fieldstown in 1927. That lumber is still preserved in the Hand home place, which is owned by Donald and Mary Ann Hand.

Legends tell us the new school opened by 1922; however, new information leads us to think it may have opened earlier. It seems as if the



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students from the surrounding areas continued to attend school after the coal mines moved out. We find where the coal mines did open a school in Republic. Stories tell us Kate Bonino taught there in the early part of her teaching career. Shortly afterwards, Jefferson County built and opened several new schools. It is assumed the County took up the students' education as the mining companies deserted them.

All the new school buildings looked similar with the same floor plan-inside interior and outside exterior. Among the schools built were: Mineral Springs, Brookside, Graysville, Gardendale, Corner, Mt Olive and New Castle. There was possibly one at Sayre. (?) All the schools had five rooms and each had a cloak room. In the cloak room was a place for the students to hang their coats, a drinking fountain and a closet for the teacher to store her materials. The exterior was of stucco and painted a light yellow (or) cream color. Two huge flower pots adorned the front of the building and there was also one on the back side. Two smaller matching flower pots were on each side of the big front door. Most of the flower pots were never planted, but instead was used for sweethearts to sit and court. They were frequently used on Sunday afternoon strolls when the Kodak camera was brought along. We are told the wide rock walkway, which led up to the front of the school, was laid later. During the Great Depression (or shortly there after) a government program was in force to create jobs. We are told this walkway was laid by the WPA men. There was also a matching rock retainer wall that circled the front and sides of the school. It was a great place for the students to sit, chat and wait for the school bus to pick them up. The floors were of tongue and groove pine and were oiled down with black grease. Moms hated this since it ruined the student's clothing and shoes. It was not unusual for a student to take the black grease home on their clothing at the end of the day. Each summer, while school was out, the County oiled the floors for the coming up year. I still don't know the purpose of the oil.

The basement housed the huge steam furnace which had to be fed with coal. During the winter, a high red brick chimney bellowed black smoke and also provided a small corner for the little ones to meet and giggle. Coal was purchased from local miners and was shoveled down a shoot to be near the furnace. Sometimes we had a janitor who kept the furnace going and sometimes it had to be the principal. The school bus usually arrived with students before the principal arrived with the school key. It was bitter cold waiting for him to arrive. We would then have a few minutes before the 8:00 bell rang. Each room had a steam radiator, but these did not get warm until after lunch. So, the principal would allow us to go to the furnace room and thaw ourselves out before class started. Once the radiators got hot, the windows would have to be raised. There was not a way to control the heat and steam put out.



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Each room was bright and cheerful due to the wonderful wide and high windows. For little ones, there seemed to be a million panes. Instead of day dreaming, we would count the panes. The bottom portion of the windows could be swung out on warm days and the cool flowing fresh air kept the students alert. The breeze also helped to refresh the students as they came in from the play ground. The window sills were great for the teachers to grow their favorite plants. The bottom panes also came in handy for displaying art work. During lunch and recess the older students in Jr. High were allowed to sit on the window sills and carry on conversations with any one who might pass by on the outside. The younger students could not wait to be older and try this. One thing the younger students would get in big trouble for was jumping out the window. If the teacher left the room, there would be one brave soul who would take a leap. Of course there was always a price to pay, such as a paddling or writing 100 sentences.

The room was surrounded on two sides with chalk boards, called blackboards. The teacher's penmanship was tested on the boards. It was difficult to write in a straight legible line. One did not dare erase the information on the board without the teacher's permission. The fear of the class was to hear the teacher's long fingernail go screeching down the board. Test were written by the teacher on the board and the students would copy the test and fill in the answers. (There were no copy machines in those days). Teachers would usually do this while the students were at PE. Students were often rewarded for good behavior by erasing the board and dusting the erasers. Beating the chalk dust from the erasers was performed on the rock retainer walls or the big flower pots. Most students would be in slow motion and take advantage of being outside the classroom. It was not unusual for the teacher to come to the window and call them back into class. Teachers would also put problems on the board and allow students to come forward and solve the problem in front of the class.

About 1948-49, an addition was added to the school. The addition included two new classrooms, lunchroom, office and library. This was the first time hot meals were available. Up until this time, a paper sack lunch was brought from home. A small number of students had a metal lunch box, which was a luxury. Students who lived within walking distance could go home for lunch. The county hired two ladies to work the lunch room, which was a cook/manager and one cook/helper. Later a third lady was added. Known lunchroom workers were: Mildred Beatty, Helen Fields, Daisy Fuller, Oma Lee Fields, Gladys Glidewell and Maurine



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Greer. I'm sure there were others that I'm not aware of. The kids loved the dried butter beans and also the peanut butter cookies. One thing for sure, no child went hungry.

We did not have indoor toilets when I attended the school. I understand indoor toilets were installed about 1954. We had two outside green toilets. The girl's building was on the south side of the school and the boy's toilet was on the north side of the school. There were about 4 seats to each building, but the teachers had their own private seat with a door. The students did not have a door. For privacy, a friend would stand in front of the one seated, stretch her legs and arms out so her friend would not be exposed. About year 1951 there was an epidemic of Yellow Jaundice Fever. So many of the children got sick, sick, sick. Some had to be hospitalized. The disease was highly contagious and the Health Department was called in. Unfortunately, the disease was not blamed on the school toilets, but rather on homes where a student was down with the disease. The county escaped the problem and the green toilets remained for several more years. When the inside toilets were installed, they replaced the space that had been reserved for the library and the office. It was so nice that the students no longer had to blaze the rain and mud to get to the restroom.

We had no gym, but there were designated areas reserved for different grades, genders and games. The smoothest and best area in the back was reserved for the boy's basketball team. Also, the big baseball diamond at the very back of the property was a nice spot. There was even a backstop. On warm dry days, the principal would tie a cross tie to the back of his car and pull it around the baseball diamond to make the playing area smooth. This was called, "dragging the field". We always got excited when we had a visiting team come play our boys. I understand there were cheerleaders in the late 1940's and early 1950's. I was told these girls did not have uniforms, but this did not keep them off the sidelines as they cheered their team on. 1951 brought about the blue and white cheerleader uniforms and the school was so proud. To my memory, there were about six or eight girls who yelled their hearts out. Namely, Marie Doss, Billie Hand, Bobbie Jean Hand, Ann Anderson, Carol Abney and Joyce Fields. There may have been others, but this is all who come to mind. By this time, the dirt ball field was replaced with the team going to play at The Boy's Club in downtown Birmingham. Shortly afterwards, the team and all it's fans traveled to Brookside Jr. High School. The county had built a few gyms for the schools, but Mineral was not lucky enough to get one of the bids. Our team would play other schools such as Graysville, Adamsville, Sandusky and Brookside. Most were from the western part of the county. Brookside was our most feared team. Their



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colors were black and red, which intimidated us.

The girls had their own softball field at the back of the school while the little ones played in front. Little ones played games such as: Marbles, Jacks, Hopscotch, Annie Over, Red Rover, Hide and Seek, Jump Rope and many more. The boys loved to play in the trees, build swings, and bend twigs. There was also a frog pond nearby and the boys loved to catch tadpoles to take home, or put in the classroom. We had a wonderful slide, which seemed ever so high. It was always slick as glass and gave a great ride down.

Riding the school bus was always a thrill for the small children. Our first school bus was the classic yellow and shaped like a box. Mr. Vest from Coalburg drove the bus for years and he was wonderful for the kids. He was always taking care of the little ones. This bus had long seats down the center of the aisle and then there were two seats on each side of the bus. The aisles were very narrow and one could hardly pass down them to try finding a seat. The bus was already filled with students when it got to Fieldstown. From that point on, one had to stand up. There were no bars at the top of the bus to hang onto. When the driver stopped, all who were standing were thrown to the back and on top of one another. Same thing happened again as the driver would take off. Later the bus was updated and all the seats were on each side of the bus. However, many students still had to stand in the aisle. Another long time bus driver for the school was Mr. J.D. Phillips. He was also known to take care and look out for the children. There was a railroad track between Fieldstown and Mineral. One of the older boys was always given permission to be the "flag man". When we came to the RR tracks, he would exit the bus, cross the tracks on foot, look both ways and then motion the driver with all the kids to come on across. All the younger boys could not wait until they would be old enough to become a "flag man".

The school's auditorium was composed of two class room that were divided by a roll-up partition. Once rolled up, the two were converted into a large auditorium. This was used for P.T.A. meetings, Glee Club performances, Harvest Festivals, May Day Activities and any special interest on behalf of the school and the community. When the petition was rolled up, we knew something good was about to happen.

4H Club was a big activity at the school. It was sponsored by the Jefferson County Board of Education. Students could become members of the 4H Club upon entering the 6th grade. This was each student's goal. All members had to have a project and write a report before the end of the year. Representatives from the organization came once per month to



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hold a meeting in the auditorium. They would speak on possible projects such as sewing, cooking, flower beds, poultry, cattle and farming. At the end of the year we had a round up of all the schools involved. A "rally" was held at Avondale Park and Fair Park State Grounds. This was a big day for the students at Mineral. The Club also sponsored a trip to the Capital in Washington, D.C. Each student had to pay their own way; therefore, not too many students got to go.

May Day activities were so important to the teaching staff and the students at Mineral. We loved and awaited the Day when classes were dismissed and the whole event was a fun day. All were involved in one way or the other as we looked forward to the crowning of the King and Queen. Stunts entertained not only the students, but the parents, grandparents and those who had already graduated. Dancing around the May Pole was usually done by the younger grades and they would create a design from crepe paper around the top of the pole. It was a colorful activity.

In the early 1970s, the communities surrounding our little school began to grow. The County thought it best to combine several of their small schools into a larger unit. This included our little beloved Mineral Springs. Today, we look back on our memories to cherish and we hold on to each one. It is my hopes you can find yourself in some of these stories. I'm sorry that I don't know much past my years at Mineral, but I welcome any information you can provide.

Records indicate the school closed in 1972 with Mr. Curtis Hart as principal. All the students were routed to the larger new schools. Most went to Gardendale. Our little school sat empty for a few years and then it burned in 1974. Sadness swept the community and hearts were broken. The community watched as bits of their lives went up in smoke. The land went up for closed bids. James and Ann (Anderson) Parsons won the bid. Two years later they sold the land to Ann's brother, Joe Anderson, and wife Ina Fay. They built a beautiful house on the site and lived there for several years. Recently, they sold the the home and land to James and Ann Parsons' son, Todd Parsons, and his wife, Lori. Todd and Lori love, respect and cherish the opportunity to live on such a historical spot. They have pictures of our little school displayed throughout their home.

Researched, written and updated by Joyce Fields Blankenship 8/2009

\*\*\*Correction and additions are welcome.

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