

New video shines light on history of West Aurora schools



A Great Depression-era mural, a gift from West Aurora High School's Class of 1933, is installed in a main hallway off of the West Aurora High School lobby. The mural, a piece of West Aurora's history, was preserved when the old high school building was demolished. (Linda Girardi / The Beacon-News)

By **Linda Girardi**
Aurora Beacon-News

SEPTEMBER 28, 2016, 10:46 AM

With only five students graduating from high school in 1870, it is fair to say that things have changed a lot over the years in West [Aurora](#) School District 129.

A new video, titled "A History of West Aurora School District 129," has been released documenting the 179 years of history of the district from 1836 to 2015.

Sharon Stredde, president emeritus of the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, researched the background and authored the script for the project.

While the Community Foundation took the lead role in preserving the district's history in the 55-minute DVD, Stredde credits a document, "A Study of Aurora Schools 1835-1935," written by former Aurora teacher Frances Jean O'Brien, for the basis of her work.

"Jean's work was indispensable in guiding my research," she said.

Stredde said the Aurora Historical Society was an "invaluable" resource that provided assistance to verify the accuracy of information, as were the approximately 100 people she interviewed as part of the project across four months.

The Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley is a non-profit, philanthropic organization founded in 1948, which administers charitable funds in the form of grants and scholarships throughout the greater Aurora area, the tri-cities of Geneva, Batavia and St. Charles, and Kendall County.

She said the Community Foundation five years ago decided to pay homage through a series of history videos to endowment fund donors, individuals and businesses such as the John S. Dunham Endowment Fund which is a tribute to the Dunham family and the Community Foundation Memorial Endowment Fund in memory of Virgil L. Gilman.

"We developed the project to honor these individuals and organizations maintaining permanent funds with the foundation. It is also our way of preserving local history and showing our respect for the past," said Stredde, who served as a Community Foundation administrator from 1985 to 2015.

The Community Foundation has produced 27 videos since 2011, all of which are collaborative efforts, she said.

Longtime West Aurora School Board member and West Aurora High School graduate Neal Ormond is the narrator of the videos, including the newly released video that preserves the heritage and traditions of the West Aurora School District.

The video says the district's first school was housed in a log cabin along the Fox River north of New York Street. The first teacher on the West Side was Angelina Atwater, who taught eight to 10 students, according to the video.

Stredde said she was fascinated with the school district's leaders, including Frank H. Hall, who was named the second superintendent from 1868 to 1875. He was known for "guiding the schools in a new direction" and visited the homes of families to encourage parents to keep their children in school.

Hall developed an advanced course of study focusing on science to provide new teachings to older students, she said. The first high school classes for West Aurora students were offered in 1868, with five students graduating from the Class of 1870, according to the video.

Stredde said Hall left for a time to be an administrator of the Sugar Grove Normal and Industrial School which offered traditional academics and agricultural classes.

She said Hall was a well-rounded and accomplished individual. Along with being an administrator in Sugar Grove, he managed a general store and a boarding house, was the Sugar Grove postmaster and township

treasurer as well as operated his own lumber yard and creamery businesses and would preach sermons on Sundays.

Hall returned to West Aurora in 1887 and stayed until 1890. He became superintendent for the Illinois State School for the Blind in Jacksonville and invented the Hall braillewriter in 1892.

The DVD is available for purchase at the Aurora Historical Society's Museum Store in the David L. Pierce Art and History Center, 20 E. Downer Place in Aurora.

The other history videos are available for viewing on the Community Foundation's website at www.communityfoundationfrv.org/communications/video-histories/.

Linda Girardi is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News

Copyright © 2016, Aurora Beacon-News

This article is related to: [Aurora](#)