

The ABCs of school records

By Cecile W. Jensen, CG

After thirty years as a high school teacher, it would seem logical that I would research school records. But it wasn't until I was completing my husband's applications for the Ohio Genealogical Society's Lineage Societies that I realized we had not documented ourselves. I had the Stedman's journey from Michigan back through Ohio to Virginia nicely documented but had to scramble to develop our own paper trail. We realized we were even beginning to forget details of our childhood. One memory my husband Jim wanted to refresh was the year he spent at a one-room school. The adventure to find the school and its records eventually lead to exploring the use of public and private records for genealogical research.

School records are one of the most under-used sources of genealogical information, according to Bryan L. Mulcahy, reference librarian at Fort Myers-Lee County Library.¹

As any classroom teacher knows, a student's age, address, parents' names, and sometimes their occupations were required for the school record. Additional information collected could include siblings, extra curricular activities, after-school jobs, as a well as special health needs.

State and federal law governs school records. The current law is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the United States Department of Education.² It specifies how the record may be shared and when permission is needed to release the information.

Older records have, in some cases, been given to historical societies or are held at local or state archives. The following case studies highlight techniques to find school records at the K-12 and university level. Records can also be found for ancestors working as teachers, principals, superintendent, and school board members. E-Bay has school records, ledgers, and photos listed in its auctions.

One-room school

The first case study highlights the steps to locate information on the one-room school Jim attended in 1957. He could recall the impressions and activities of the school, but not its name, the teacher, or classmates: *I was in second grade with kids from first grade to sixth with two or three kids in each grade. The teacher would go to each grade and teach their lesson. I liked it because when she would go to higher grade levels I could follow along. There were two rooms: a bathroom and the school room. Coats were put in the back on hooks. I walked to school. It seemed like a mile. It might have been a quarter mile. Seems like a half mile or a mile.*

We were looking for the name of the school, the teacher, and a little history.

A preliminary online search showed the school could have been part of one of the four school districts in the township: Willow Run, Ann Arbor, Plymouth-Canton, or Ypsilanti.

Calls to the school districts did not turn up any information. The plat map on the Superior Township Web site did not show a trace of the school. But a call to the township hall gave us our first piece of information. One of the secretaries knew of the school, and it was called Crippen School.

On a nice fall day we decided to drive to the area. When we arrived at the corner of Cherry Hill and Frains Lake Road in Washtenaw County we found a vacant lot. A stop at the town clerk's office to look at plat maps wasn't successful since they only had recent maps. But they said we should speak with the Meyers who lived near the old school. She was a local historian and very approachable. We thought we should do a little research at the local history room before we made a visit. Maybe we could answer a few questions for ourselves.

Local history rooms in libraries hold collections of materials that are unique to the area and may not be duplicates at the state level. At the Washtenaw County Library, we found an 1881 atlas that had a plat map that showed the location of the school. It also gave its history and the family that had donated the land—the Crippen family, of course!

And, next to the Crippen farm was the Meyers farm. The couple we were headed to visit had deep roots in the community.

Paul and Betty Meyers welcomed us in and shared a wealth of information. They filled in all the blanks.

DETROIT HIGH SCHOOLS

Northwestern SCHOOL.

M.A. Frank Wendt HAS COMPLETED

COURSE (2) IN Latin

WITH A GRADE OF 3

L. E. Cooper TEACHER

SEMESTER ENDING June 23, 1921

FORM HIGH SCHOOL 1924—PUPIL'S CREDIT SLIP

Figure 1 (left): 1921 "Credit Slip" issued to Frank Wendt, student at Northwestern High School, Detroit. Wendt received a 3 in Latin during the second semester of the course. Figure 2 (below): After graduating from high school, Wendt attended University of Detroit Law School, where he received his J.D.

**UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT
LAW SCHOOL**

Report of F. J. Wendt

1st Sem. 1924-5

Grade of 70 or over indicate passing; 60-70 a condition; 50 failure.

A condition must be removed by successfully passing a re-examination within the semester, while a failure requires the student to repeat the course.

| SUBJECT | Grade | SUBJECT | Grade |
|---------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| Agency | 72 | Judgments | |
| Bailments | | Justice Court Practice | 78 |
| Bankruptcy | | Michigan Pleading | |
| Carriers | | Mortgages | |
| Common Law Pleading | | Municipal Corporations | |
| Conflict of Laws | | Negotiable Instruments | |
| Constitutional Law | | Partnership | |
| Contracts Cases | | Personal Property | 73 |
| Contracts Text | | Private Corporations | |
| Conveyancing | | Quasi-Contracts | |
| Criminal Law | 6 | Public Utilities | |
| Criminal Procedure | | Real Property I | |
| Damages | | Real Property II | |
| Domestic Relations | 88 | Sales | |
| Elementary Law | 89 | Torts | 6 |
| Ethics | | Wills and Estates | |
| Equity | | Thesis | |
| Evidence | | | |
| Federal Procedure | | | |
| International Law | | | |

Signed Helen E. [Signature]
Secretary.

The teacher was Mrs. Opal Graichen. They had a 1980 photo taken the day the school burned down and a ledger that Paul's father kept when he was the treasurer. And the best part of the story is that their son Larri was Jim's classmate.

If you have one-room school memories, there are a number of projects to preserve and adapt one-room schools. There is a call to develop a database of profiles of the schools, such as The Michigan One-room Schoolhouse Association Survey.³ The One-room Schoolhouse Resource is a compilation of historical one-room school resources throughout North America.⁴ The Pittsboro One-Room School #3 in Indiana is a great example of one community's efforts.⁵

Urban public schools

Urban settings may turn out to be more formidable to research. The second case study started with finding the Northwestern High School yearbook at the Detroit Public Library's Burton Collection. My father, Frank Wendt, was pictured in the choir and in a school play. The family had few photos of him in his youth, so this was an exciting discovery. A visit to the Detroit Public Schools Web site stated that older school records were stored at the New Center building. I took my birth certificate to prove I was Frank's daughter, but they said they had to see his death certificate. I found this surprising since he was born in 1904 and would be 102 years old, but I complied. When I returned with his 1964 certificate they told me the real reason I couldn't get his high school records. While they were microfilmed, the card index to the records had been lost. Even an offer to index the records fell on deaf ears. Budget deficits keep the district's focus on the education of the current generation. To find the re-

pository of the schools' records may require phone calls to the district, local history room at the public library, and a local historical society. Cyndi's List has a range of Internet resources indexed for schools.⁶ Frank's school career could not be detailed beyond the eighth graduation photo, a 1921 Northwestern credit slip, and his University of Detroit Law School report of the 1924-25 school year.

Urban parochial schools

Parochial school researchers will fare better if the schools are still open. In many urban areas, schools have been shut or consolidated. In Detroit, the Catholic Archdiocese Web site lists the closed parishes. I requested records for my grandfather, mother, and myself. All of the schools we attended from 1897-1968 are closed. I was only able to obtain records for my own academic career. But on a brighter note, there are grass roots movements to help restore a school's history. By posting several family graduation photos for Assumption and St. Josaphat's schools, fellow researchers have contacted and donated photos and documents to share online. Web sites such as Classmates.com and Reunion.com are meeting places for alumni of all ages. I have found links to Web sites dedicated to a parish school's history, complete with scanned yearbooks and recorded fight songs.

The Archdiocese of Chicago has a request form posted online so that student record transcripts may be requested. There is a \$10 charge for the service and a copy of a photo ID.⁷

The parochial school was usually staffed by teach-

ing Brothers or Sisters. Requesting their records from their religious order can expand your family history. The records of ordained priests, mother superiors, and religious brothers and sisters are another neglected, but rich, source of genealogical information. When I began researching, I felt I was off-track researching auxiliary lines of the family. After all, researchers are encouraged to begin their family

tree with the current generation and then add each additional set of ancestors. I had the misconception that while it was respectful to note a family member in a religious order, it was not productive to the research at hand. I was mistaken! If you have a family member who joined a religious order, I encourage you to contact the archives as soon as possible. The provincial necrology details the teaching career as well as the family of the member.

Online research

A quick search online found archives and repositories with indexed records and resources. The Newberry Library (Chicago) catalog contains "Index to the school attendance records for part of Kane County, Illinois, 1858-59."

The Indiana State Library's Genealogy Division holds "Index to Lake County school enumeration records, 1880-94" and "Index to North Township schools (without East Chicago and Whiting and limited Hammond), school enumeration records 1903-31."

In Athens County, Ohio, the local history resources at the Nelsonville Library include yearbooks, graduation announcements, and class photos from 1894 and 1904.

University Web sites and alumni associations offer books and records for the collegiate years. Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana, holds the records,

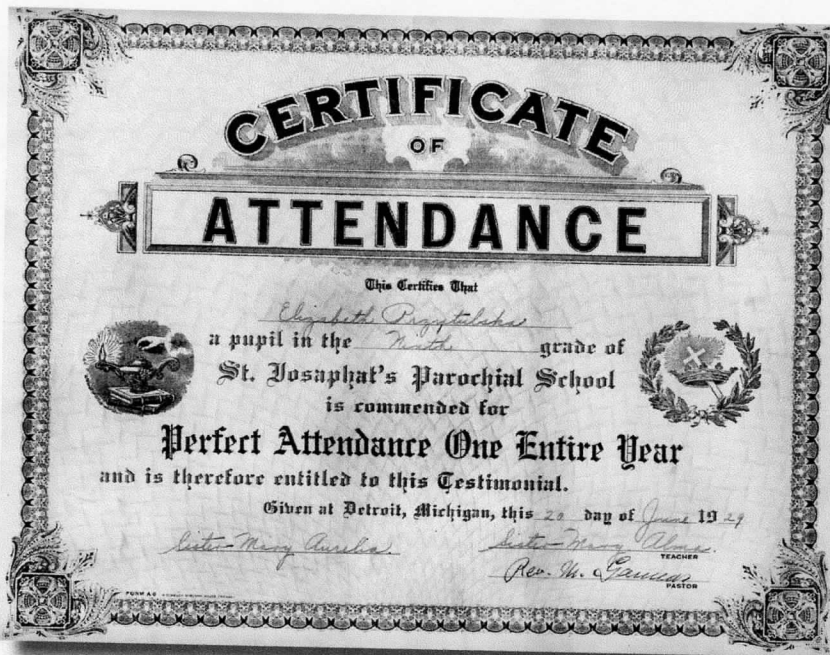


Figure 3: Parental tall tales of having perfect attendance sometimes prove true. This is Elisabeth Przytulska's 1929 Certificate for Perfect Attendance at St. Joseph's High School in Detroit.

including grades, of its predecessor Hartsville College, founded as Hartsville Academy in 1850. It is a secular school of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

Ohio University published a book entitled *In Ohio University 1804-2004*. Author Betty Hallow states, "Hundreds of people sent photos, letters, and scrapbooks. We wanted to show the tremendous

spirit that students have created and still respond to in memory."

The Family History Library Catalog contains a number of entries for school records. Some examples include:

Ashmore, Edythe. *Lest We Forget*. Detroit: Eby & Stubbs, 1904. A brief history and biographies of the Detroit Training School alumni.

Coldham, Peter Wilson. *Child Apprentices in America from Christ's Hospital, London, 1617-1778*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1990.

"This book contains extracts from admission records for Christ's Hospital in London, which was a home and school for orphans. As many orphans were apprenticed in America, records include name of the ship and the state to where the apprentice was going."

Helge, Jan and Paula Malak, eds. *The Greater Rose-land Area of Chicago*. South Holland, Ill.: South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society, 1994. Alumni register.

Prentiss, George Lewis. *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York: Historical and Biographical Sketches of its First Fifty Years*. New York: A.D.F. Randolph & Company, 1889.

As the London indicates, European school records are also available. Local European historians are writing about their village schools. Krzysztof

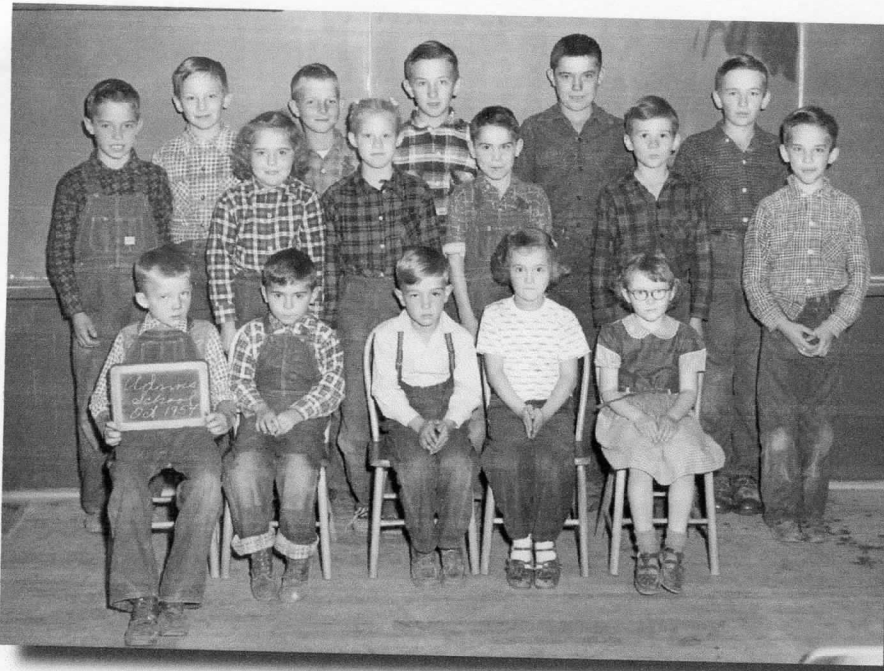


Figure 4: The 1954 class photo was taken at Adams One Room School in Bad Axe, Michigan (School District Sigel #3). The enrollment was made up of children from just six families. Back row, left to right: Carl Learman, Calvin Messing, Harvey Learman, Donald Braun, Gerald Learman; middle row: Judy Braun, Barbara Wooster, Richard Braun, Charles Wooster, Joseph Learman; front row: Dale Messing, Junior Braun, Milton Jurgess, Linda Binder, and Rita Learman. While the original one hundred-year-old building has been moved to the Grice Heritage Museum in Harbor Beach, Michigan, to serve as a school museum, classes are still conducted in a new one-room schoolhouse on the original property. Photo courtesy of Hal Learman.

Kowalkowski's motivation was to chronicle the school his ancestor was the headmaster of from 1916 to 1931. Kowalkowski's book includes the history of the Polish school and village Mirotki. The village is near Starogard Gdanski. The author wrote three chapters and the rest is school chronicles. The book was written for the one hundredth anniversary of the school and includes historic photos. One of his earlier books listed my uncle as a schoolboy, and when I was in Poland I was able to find my family's 1880s school records in the ledger.

Extraction projects are also underway. The Posen High School project is hosted by PolishRoots⁸ and contains information extracted from high school records of communities that existed in the province of Posen, today the Wielkopolska or Poznan region of Poland.

While there is not a central location nor formula for finding school records, public, private, and collegiate records that are found give a richer understanding to your ancestors' lives. 🌳

Notes

1. "School Records and Censuses: Hidden Genealogical Gems," Southwest Florida Library Network, online at <<http://www.swfln.org/about/committees/pdf/SchoolRecordsandCensuses.pdf>>.
2. "Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act" (FERPA), United States Department of Education, online at <<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>>.
3. "The Schoolhouse Survey," The Michigan One-Room Schoolhouse Association, online at <<http://www.one-roomschools.org/survey.htm>>.

4. "The One-Room Schoolhouse Resource Center," online at <http://sites.onlinemac.com/kcampbell/One_Room_Schoolhouses.htm>.
5. "History of Pittsboro One-room School #3," One-room School Committee, online at <<http://www.pittsborooneroomschool.org/history.htm>>.
6. Schools category, *Cyndi's List*, online at <<http://www.cyndislist.com/schools.htm>>.
7. "Student Records Release Request," The Archdiocese of Chicago, online at <<http://archives.archchicago.org/request.htm>>.
8. "Posen High Schools Index," *PolishRoots*, online at <http://www.polishroots.org/databases/posen_school_search.htm>.

*Ceil Wendt Jensen is a Certified Genealogist who lectures and writes on Midwestern and Polish research. She has thirty years of teaching experience in traditional and electronic art, art history, and social studies. Ceil has documented her ancestry back to East and West Prussia, Galicia, Congress Poland and Posen, and has done onsite research in Europe. She is the author of *Sto Lat*, the Polish Genealogical Society of America's new book on finding your Polish roots, and three books from Arcadia Press: *Detroit's Polonia*, *Detroit's Mount Olivet Cemetery*, and *Detroit's Mount Elliot Cemetery*.*