

***BILOXI SCHOOLS***

***1920-1929***

### The Biloxi Schools In The 1920s

Biloxi – Population, 1920 Census – 10,937

Mayor, 1920– John J. Kennedy

City Council, 1920 – W.H. Hunt, M.L. Michel

Superintendent, Biloxi Public Schools – R.P. Linfield, 1911-1922  
A.L. May, 1922-1934

Biloxi School Board –

1920 – W.W. Williams, John Latimer, W.F. Gorenflo, Charles Redding,  
Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere

1921 – Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, W.W. Williams,  
Charles Redding, W.F. Gorenflo

1922 – Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, Charles Redding, W.F. Gorenflo,  
W.J. Grant

1923 – Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, W.F. Gorenflo, W.J. Grant,  
E.L. Dukate

1924 – W.F. Gorenflo, W.J. Grant, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere,  
E.L. Dukate

1925 – W.F. Gorenflo, W.J. Grant, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate  
Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere

1926 – W.F. Gorenflo, W.J. Grant, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer

1927 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer, E.S. Balthrope

1928 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer, E.S. Balthrope

1929 – W.F. Gorenflo, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer,  
E.S. Balthrope, Mrs. Anna Heidenheim

Student Enrollment in 1920 – 1,600

Student Enrollment in 1924-1925, reported in first week– 2,274

Total Budget, Biloxi Public Schools, for 1924 - \$92,233.43

***NOTE: Board members serve during parts of years, being appointed today, for instance, so that their terms begin in March and end in March five years later. The lists of Board members by years presented above and in later sections make no attempt to reflect the "split years of Board service." Names were taken from School Board minutes at a certain point each year and the lists reflect that arbitrary decision.***

## II. THE BILOXI SCHOOLS – 1924 – 1929

With Superintendent A.L. May leading the Biloxi School District in 1924, Biloxians could look back at a school history of more than half a century and take enormous pride in what had been accomplished. The coming decade was to be a new era for the schools, as the city assumed in every respect the roles formerly occupied by individual donors of land and buildings. No longer would any single individual or family be responsible for gifts to enlarge and enrich the schools. Having passed a bond issue to construct schools in locations referred to in Board minutes as West End, Back Bay, and East End, later named respectively Lopez, Gorenflo, and Dukate, Biloxians through the City Council and the School Board began to address specifics related to the construction of three schools at the same time.



Bids for building the Back Bay (Gorenflo) school were opened on March 10, 1924. With a bid of \$48,470.75, Collins Brothers of Biloxi was given four months to complete the building. And at a special meeting on March 14, plans for the West End (Lopez) school were accepted.

Working with Superintendent May were five prominent Biloxians, members of the School Board in 1924. They were Mr. W.F. Gorenflo, Mr. W.J. Grant, Mrs. T.K. Devitt, Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere, and Mr. E.L. Dukate.

A one-time yearbook (it would be thirteen years before the school would publish another) for Biloxi High School, called *The Beacon Glow*, was published in 1924 (Miss Susan Wolcott and her family donated a copy of the book to the schools in the 1960s). It remains one of the best primary sources for revealing what the Biloxi schools were like in this pivotal year.

Faculty and students are pictured in the ordinary activities of school life. Superintendent A.L. May is shown in his third year as head of the school system. Among the twenty-two high school and junior high school teachers pictured are Mrs. J.C. (Catherine) Clower and Mrs. M.L. Michel, early in their Biloxi teaching careers which would continue for many years; Mary Cabill O'Keefe, chair of modern languages; Caroline Porter, chair of public school music; Cora Llado, English, reading, junior high school; Lily Bowen, civics, writing, spelling, junior high school; and two male teachers, A.L. Penglase, chair of the commercial department and athletic director, and Joe Drake Arrington, chair of Latin.

Miss Edna Holley is included in the faculty members pictured and is identified as "Principal of the High School" in the 1923-1924 school session. So far as can be determined, she was the first woman principal of record of the high school. It is likely that Miss Holley's failing eyesight, which



resulted in her retirement in 1925, was responsible for her being listed as "Assistant Principal" in the Board's regular April 1924 meeting. At any rate, the Board minutes in 1924 exhibited a gender-specific bias that would be part of the schools for many years—as the minutes show that "the Superintendent was instructed to secure a first class man principal of the high school" (April 4, 1924). It is interesting to look through the 1924 yearbook to discover what Biloxi High School was like in that early time. One page is devoted to an austere room with desks in ordered rows identified as the study hall; an equally bare room with desk and straight-backed chairs, the typewriting room; and the "Teacher's Rest Room," with uncomfortable looking chairs and a single small table with lamp. Students are shown in a production of the operetta "Windmills of Holland," with a chorus of farmers' daughters and workhands.

The football team of 1923 is shown in uniforms with striped sleeves that one must assume were yellow, since at that time they were the Biloxi High Yellow-Jackets. (The team understandably appears somewhat glum, perhaps as a result of the losing 3-7 season.) The basketball team, on the other hand, won 16 of 20 games. It is hard to imagine the scoring excitement engendered in two of the most important games against undefeated Alabama teams, Spring Hill and Barton Academy, with Biloxi's winning scores 15-13 and 19-10 respectively. Mobile and New Orleans papers reported that Biloxi had the best team on the Coast. Baseball was not yet underway, but the team expected a good season.



Faculty salaries throughout the decade were subjects of continuing discussion among Board members—and, no doubt, the faculty members themselves. In the 1924 election of teachers recorded in Board minutes, salaries range from \$150 per month for Miss Holley, assistant principal, to \$100-\$125 for more experienced teachers and \$90 per month for those with less experience.

Principals who served during this period included Ethel Arguelles, Howard I, from 1926-1941; Helena Brander, Lopez, 1926-1943; Delphine Holloway Russ, Howard II, 1927-1963; Alma Ritch, Gorenflo, 1927-1958; M.F. Nichols, Colored School, 1926-1945. (See "Biographies" Section later.)

The curriculum was representative of courses of study in schools of the time, with basic science, mathematics and history classes required of all students, together with English, reading, spelling, and elective Latin and French courses.

In 1922 the State Board of Education, in accordance with Mississippi law, prepared a "Course in Moral Instruction," used to a limited extent by schools in late 1922 and made available to schools in the 1923-1924 school year. The law required the State Board to prepare "a suitable course of instruction in the principles of morality and good manners to be used in all of the public schools of the state" (*Course in Moral Instruction* 15). It further required the course to include "what is known

as the Mosaic Ten Commandments," while at the same time stipulating "that no doctrinal or sectarian teaching shall be permitted in any public school in this state" and that no student would be required to attend the course if parents made such a request (*Moral Instruction* 15).

"The end of all education is the formation of character," the manual stated. "The real function of the school is to produce the good citizen, and if it fails in this, it might as well close its doors" (*Moral Instruction* "Preface"). The principles and rules for living delineated in this course of study served to inform and direct such things as classroom behavior, citizenship and general conduct, health, and workmanship. Beginning with "The Ten Commandments" and "The Golden Rule" and ending with "The Lord's Prayer" (with the injunction that children should memorize this prayer and repeat it daily), the course specified rules the student should adopt in regard to self-control, clean play, self-reliance, team work, patriotism, kindness, loyalty, duty to older people, and table manners.

It would be difficult to fault the precepts laid down for "the Good American" in this course, and one might fairly conclude that, if followed, the rules would be useful and appropriate today in developing a healthier, safer, better lifestyle for everyone. It *is* possible, however, to look at the section devoted to table manners and wonder whether much school time should have been spent in teaching students how to use a butter spreader or an ice cream fork.

In 1926, the school budget was \$92,233.43. Teachers' salaries totaled \$71,045. A salary increase for teachers was discussed in a June meeting, but no action was taken. The average monthly salary for white teachers was \$120; average salary for black teachers was \$66 (Board Minutes, June 1, 1926, 3). This salary pattern was followed in the Biloxi schools—and no doubt in the rest of the state—for many years. Not until the 1950s would teachers of both races be paid equally for the same experience and degree level. In general, the pattern was simply that the black teachers received one-half the salary paid to white teachers with comparable experience and training. It was a practice that eventually would find black teachers appealing to the superintendent and the School Board to give them "a living wage."

The early 1920s saw a gradual increase in the student population in Biloxi. In 1922-23, enrollment totaled 1,750; 1923-1924, 2,091; 1924-1925, 2,274. By 1926, the report of enrollment in the Biloxi schools showed the following: first grade, 564; second grade, 257; third grade, 271; fourth grade, 269; fifth grade, 190; sixth grade, 197; seventh grade, 161; eighth grade, 125; ninth grade, 112; tenth grade, 102; eleventh grade, 65; twelfth grade, 46. Total enrollment was 2,451. White enrollment was 2,030; black enrollment, 421 (Board Minutes, June 1, 1926, 5).

Examining these figures, one is immediately struck by the diminishing number of students as the grade levels increase, with an obvious dropout percentage that would be unacceptable in accredited schools today. And perhaps there was a high rate of academic failure that accelerated the dropout percentage. The School Board, in what appears to be a hard-nosed view of student expectations, passed a motion that "only such students that average 85% or more in the four years high school course be recommended by the principal to enter college" (Board Minutes, September 3, 1926, 7).

In a precursor to the kind of relationship schools would later bear in even greater measure to the total lives of the children they served, in the late 1920s a system of health education was inaugurated in the schools. The dentists of the city examined the children's teeth, records were made by teachers, and efforts were made to correct problems that had been found. Conscious of the dangers of communicable diseases, the Board mandated that any persons employed by the school system might be required to obtain a certificate of health from a reputable physician as a condition of employment or enrollment. In addition, pupils who had been absent more than three days in succession *were required* to bring a certificate of health from the family physician or the city health officer.

The Biloxi schools early on, it seems, adopted the philosophy that the schools needed to take care of the whole child, not merely his mind. Moral training went hand in hand with academic instruction—and a healthy student would be capable of achieving at a higher level than one whose health needs were neglected.

Always, of course, as the schools began to travel a road that would later be described as "trying to be all things to all people," it was finances and building needs that occupied so much of the School Board's attention and time. The 1926 budget for the Biloxi schools was \$92,233.43, with teachers' salaries of \$71,045.00 accounting for most of the budget.

In the December 23, 1926, meeting, the Board accepted plans for the Howard II Elementary School and what was then known as the Biloxi Colored School. The Board voted to ask the city to submit a bond issue to the voters. This was only a scant two years following the voters' approving bond issues to build DuKate, Lopez, and Gorenflo schools, and there was justifiable concern about asking additional support from Biloxians. Having seen the results of building programs in other areas of the city, residents in the area east of the new Dukate school were making a strong case for a new school for their children.

On October 27, 1927, at the regular meeting of the Board, a delegation from Howard II, including Mrs. C.W. Thornton, Mrs. Dave Ross, Mrs. Joe Ross, Mrs. Amos, Ross, and Mrs. George Como, appeared before the Board in the interest of the school. Since the Board had already acted to ask city commissioners to submit a bond issue to the voters for the Howard II building, no action was taken, but the Board promised that "their building would be comfortable and safe for the present year" (Board Minutes 29).

Later that year, on November 4, the Board authorized construction of a temporary room at the Lopez School to take care of overcrowded conditions in the sixth grade.

Architectural plans for Howard February 1928 and the building until April 16, 1928, that the



II were again considered in order was revised. It was not Board considered and then

accepted specifications for the proposed new elementary School. It had been decided to name the school in honor of the city's most prominent benefactor, Harry T. Howard, and, in fact, the school was to be officially named Harry T. Howard No. 2. Specifications called for fourteen rooms, with two electric lights in each room; the classrooms were to be 23 by 32 feet, except for the first grade room, which was to be 23 by 35 feet. The height of the basement was to be nine feet from floor to floor, and Number One lumber was to be used for joists and rafters. Cost was estimated to be 19-1/2 cents per cubic foot. Carl Matthes presented plans and specifications, and the Board agreed to the usual architect's fee of 5%. On May 4, 1928, the Board voted to ask Mr. Harry T. Howard to lay the cornerstone for the new building.

On May 15, 1928, with Mayor John J. Kennedy and Commissioners Michel and Swanzy present, bids for the erection of Howard II were received and opened. With combined low bids exceeding the amount appropriated for the work, the Board rejected all bids, meeting later the same day to make changes in plans and specifications

After lengthy and extensive addenda to specifications to reduce costs of contracts for building, plumbing, heating, and wiring, the Board voted to accept bids from Collins Brothers Contracting Company for building Howard II for the sum of \$60,000. Electrical work would be done by A.L. Mangin, \$1,260; plumbing, Biloxi Plumbing and Heating, \$10,200. Proceeds from the bond issue amounting to \$83,000 were set aside for the building, with the contract calling for a finishing date before October 1, 1928.

The four-and-one-half months given the contractor to complete the work seems an astonishingly short period by today's standards, though the Board had acted in April to speed up the process by having students attend school on Saturdays so that they could be out of school by May 19 and work could begin. Apparently the Board expected the deadline to be met, since it acted to buy equipment for the school at its next regular meeting. Costs for students' desks as reported in the June 14 minutes averaged about \$5, and teachers' desks were available at a cost of \$10.90 to \$27.50.

On May 4, 1928, the Board set the district's new salary schedule. Teachers in grades 1-5 were to receive salaries ranging from \$90 to \$115 per month; grades 6-8, \$90 to \$120; and high school, \$125 - \$135 (increments for experience of \$5 per month were added after five, six, and seven years of experience).

Though the high school teachers were at first glance given preferential treatment in regard to salaries, it must be remembered that only high school teachers were required at that time to have degrees from four-year institutions or normal schools. In a clear demonstration of gender discrimination, salaries for male janitors were set at \$90 per month, with female janitors receiving \$35 per month. It is of some interest to note that husband and wife teams comprised the entire janitorial staff at several schools.

In June, 1928, Board minutes show that a pay system was adopted for Biloxi teachers, requiring that teachers be listed by names, positions, rate of pay per month, and amount due, with the list to be approved by the president and secretary. It was then to be presented to the City Clerk, who would issue warrants for the teachers and other employees named and present them to the bank for deposit. The bank would then mail deposit slips as in the past, with information to be sent to the superintendent's office for records.

It is instructive to review a report to the Board in the summer of 1928 regarding student enrollment, dropouts, promotion and retardation.

TOTAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT – 1927-1928

Dukate Elementary – 361	Gorenflo Elementary – 395
Howard I Elementary – 228	Howard II Elementary – 377
Lopez Elementary – 326	High School (Grades 9-12) – 352
Biloxi Colored School –	Elementary (Grades 1-8) – 404

ENROLLMENT	AVG. DAILY ATTENDANCE	RATE OF ATTENDANCE
Grade 1 – 476	321.82	89.65%
Grade 2 – 234	169.76	90.60%
Grade 3 – 214	162.51	93.42%
Grade 4 – 188	143.53	92.59%
Grade 5 – 178	139.53	95.04%
Grade 6 – 142	119.96	95.04%
Grade 7 – 155	126.37	96.00%
Grade 8 – 100	86.30	95.36%
Total Elem. Schools – 1687	1269.78	93.32%
Grade 9 – 119	106.28	95.70%
Grade 10 – 108	98.86	96.35%
Grade 11 - 59	54.59	96.43%
Grade 12 - 66	60.43	96.10%
Total High School – 352	320.16	96.14%
Total All Schools – 2039	1589.94	
Minus Transfers – 1949	Night School – Elementary - 68	Commercial -- 28



PROMOTION AND RETARDATION

GRADE	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	DROPPED	PROMOTED	FAILED
Grade 1	476	138	249	89
Grade 2	234	48	163	23
Grade 3	214	45	150	19
Grade 4	188	37	127	24
Grade 5	178	39	126	12
Grade 6	142	13	108	21
Grade 7	155	24	115	16
Grade 8	100	12	81	7
Grade 9	119	10	99	10
Grade 10	108	9	88	11
Grade 11	59	4	41	14
Grade 12	66	6	50	10
Total	1949	385	1398	256

The percentage of failures, according to the report, was 13%, described as a normal percentage of failures. Something, however, seems out of order here when one looks at the chart following and reads the explanation quoted below:

STANDARD OF PUPILS—AGE GRADE—FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS

A pupil is considered normal if he is pursuing a standard grade according to his age, he is above normal if he is pursuing a standard grade above his age, he is below normal if he is pursuing a standard grade below his age.

Example: A pupil 11 years old, according to the national standard, would be considered normal in the fifth or sixth grade; he would be considered below normal or over age if he studied the fourth grade; he would be considered above normal or under age if he studied the seventh grade.

1923-24 – Above Normal – 9%	Normal – 53%	Below Normal – 38%
1924-25 – Above Normal – 16%	Normal – 54%	Below Normal – 30%
1925-26 – Above Normal – 19%	Normal – 57%	Below Normal – 24%
1926-27 – Above Normal – 13.9%	Normal – 58.1%	Below Normal – 27.8%
1927-28 – Above Normal – 17%	Normal – 57%	Below Normal – 25%
1928-29 – Above Normal – 19%	Normal – 57%	Below Normal – 24%

It is obvious that a larger percentage of students must have been in classes considered below normal for their ages than the failure rate for the 1927-1928 year would account for. It is likely that students often dropped out because of individual reasons or necessity and later enrolled in classes

where they were over-age. A dropout rate of about 20% and a failure rate of 13% account for approximately one-third of the students, by any standard a highly unsatisfactory state. Although comparable figures for other school systems in the state and nation are not readily available, it is likely that the Biloxi figures would compare favorably with those of other schools, particularly in the state. Beginning with the 1899-1900 school year, the Biloxi school system had provided a nine-month school year for students. The schools, as a result of improvements during this decade, were far better than those in most other communities. Biloxi had a long way to go, but the city's school system had made enormous strides during the 1920s.

For the school year 1927-1928, 78 teachers were employed by the district, with their salaries totaling \$85,775 for the year. Other expenditures amounted to \$12,225, making a total budget of \$98,000.

Reaching the end of the 1920s, the school system's expenditures increased slightly for the 1928-1929 session, with the budget totaling \$105,015.72; the superintendent's salary was \$4,500.00. Among the budget figures one finds that fixed charges included \$1,207.32 for the county superintendent's salary. Libraries were given \$200 for the year; physical education, \$500.

Not all School Board business dealt with construction and budgetary matters. A review of Board minutes, June 8, 1928, reveals that all five Board members—E.S. Balthrope, W.F. Gorenflo, E.L. Dukate, W.H. Latimer, and Mrs. T.K. Devitt—voted to adopt a policy that "any female teacher marrying after her contract is signed invalidates the contract" (57). By the end of the 1920s, the Board included Mrs. Anna Heidenheim, who had succeeded Mr. Balthrope in 1929.

The end of the 1920s also saw the end of an economy strong enough to allow construction of facilities and increases in teaches' salaries. Biloxi was to feel the full effects of the national economic disaster in the 1930s.



The DuKate Elementary School was built on East Howard Avenue in 1924 to serve families in the eastern portion of the city. The school underwent extensive renovation, and classrooms were added in 1960. The tree-sheltered campus welcomed thousands of Biloxi children over the years following its construction under bond issues totaling \$200,000 that also resulted in construction of Gorenflo and Lopez schools. The school building was given to the city following the opening of DuKate at the former Central Junior High School and Senior High site.



*Lopez Elementary School – Built in 1924*



*Gorenflo Elementary School - Built in 1924*