

Jourdanton I.S.D: A Century of Service

Jourdanton, Texas, was a still unincorporated boomtown in early 1911, when the state legislature authorized the creation of the Jourdanton Independent School District, making it the first such district sanctioned in Atascosa County. Jourdanton, a relative newcomer in the still-developing Brush Country south of San Antonio, was established in 1909 by founders Jourdan Campbell and T.H. Zanderson near the geographic center of the county. The vote to incorporate came in August, 1911 (Porter 265). Even in its earliest days, Jourdanton citizens, mostly hardworking farmers, ranchers, and tradesmen, voiced their desire for and willingness to work to create a strong educational program for their children.

Private or “subscription” schools, such as the Hilburn school northwest of Jourdanton, and a small community school in town, served area residents at first. An advertisement in the San Antonio Daily Express for July 11, 1909, touted the intense development of this area, described as “the most fertile county of Texas” and described the \$10,000 school and park system already under construction (12). Indeed, by December of 1909, a third teacher had to be hired to deal with increased student attendance at the city’s subscription school (“Jourdanton School”). The county newspaper ran multiple articles in 1910 issues marking increasing enrollment and improvements to the original school building and contents, but by early 1911 the Jourdanton community had become populous enough to merit a fully-sanctioned and funded school to meet more rigorous state standards. Indeed, by 1910, the Jourdanton school program boasted 242 students, the largest enrollment of any Atascosa County school (Porter 266).

An intense rivalry was already developing between Jourdanton and the nearby community of Pleasanton, the center of what was called Common School District 1, which was the governing agency for most of the community schools in the area. Jourdanton’s rapid growth,

threatening to overtake Pleasanton's population totals, led to an ill-advised attempt to pass a \$12,000 bond issue for Common District 1, levying taxes against citizens who, because they had not established full residency, were unable to vote. Jourdanton citizens, irate over the power play, appealed to legislators. As a result, The Texas Legislature created the Jourdanton Independent School District, the first such district to be identified in the county, with House Bill No. 496. The Bill provided for an elected board of trustees, land dedicated for the purpose of school buildings, rules for operation, and authorization to levy taxes and hold bond elections to provide for the financial support of the district (Texas 794-800). The final section of the law, which was approved and went into effect March 23, 1911, provides justification for this swift action:

“Sec. 31. The deplorable condition of the public free schools with the territory comprising said independent school district, being now without adequate public school buildings, and wholly insufficient equipment, and without funds to provide for the same, creates an emergency, and an imperative public necessity exists . . . that this Act take effect and be in force from and after its passage, and it is so enacted” (Texas 801).

The first school board was elected in April 1911, and included George M. Martin, C.T. Wynn, J. A. Steinle, O. F. Walton, R.L. Witt, R.E. Phillips and P. F. Watson. (“School Board Just Elected” 1)

Residents wasted little time in passing a \$20,000 bond election to build a school and park system that was the envy of other area towns, and served as a drawing card for more families looking to settle in what several newspapers of the day frequently referred to as the most progressive town in South Texas. Voters also approved a 25-cent maintenance tax by a vote of 42-0 in June, 1911 (“Maintenance Tax”). A three-story brick building was erected in the center of the growing city,

at the intersection of Campbell and Oak Streets, just a block south of the site of the new county courthouse. A football field, a separate high school building and gymnasium were added on adjoining lots over the next decades to keep pace with a growing scholastic population.

Despite rapid community and school population growth, the early years were not without difficulty. Funding for teacher salaries and other expenses was not always easily available, despite tax levies. The outbreak of World War I meant the loss of Principal John B. Hays to military service in 1917 (Minutes Vol I: 7). The school purchased war bonds and held war bond drives on campus throughout 1918, and the threat of Spanish Influenza, which killed so many during the war years, halted athletic trips and even threatened to necessitate the school's closing in the same year, though this was averted. (Minutes Vol. I: 40-49). Nita Witten, a lifelong resident and businesswoman of Jourdanton, remembers that as an elementary student in the old three-story, red-brick building that stood on Oak Street (now Highway 97) just south of the courthouse, the students marched to the courthouse to pay their respects to a soldier who had died from war injuries during his voyage home from France. "He was brought to Jourdanton and his flag-draped coffin was placed on the south rotunda of the court house and school was dismissed. . . . He was then laid to rest in our City Cemetery. To us small fry it was most solemn and impressive" (Witten 4).

In 1920, when trustees accepted the resignation of longtime Superintendent A.E. Jungerman, he was honored for his efforts in bringing the schools from a third-class to a first-class school certification, and for "securing the affiliation of the Jourdanton High School with the University of Texas as follows; English 2 units, Physics, 1 unit, Latin, 2 units, Modern History, 1 unit, Plane Geometry, 1 unit, and Algebra, 2 units" (Minutes Vol. I: 90). By 1931, Jourdanton I.S.D. was a four-year high school (grades 8-11). In 1932, county school officials

adopted a county-wide literacy exam for students and authorized participation in Rural Interscholastic League activities, setting the tone for achievement that has continued to be a driving force within the Jourdanton district (Atascosa History Committee 40). Within a few short years, Jourdanton had incorporated, established itself as a commercial and farming center, and been designated as the county seat. A promotional pamphlet published in 1938 indicates that the school already boasted “fifteen teachers . . . with 24 1/2 credits, and has good brick school buildings” and was fully accredited (Patterson 11). Shortly afterward, a 12th grade was added to the curriculum. A granite plaque near the current high school building memorializes the 1938 dedication of the school’s first gymnasium, a project completed with the help of the Works Progress Administration in 1938-1939.

As county population continued to grow, and travel and transportation became less difficult, smaller schools in outlying areas began closing, sending their students to Jourdanton, especially in the upper grades, to take advantage of broader curriculum. The Amphion, Hilburn, and Lyon schools were all absorbed onto Jourdanton’s campus, followed by Imogene, LaParita, and Christine schools. Christine, the largest of these, was the last to be annexed into the Jourdanton system. The last high school class graduated from Christine in 1948, with high school students being bused to Jourdanton beginning in the fall of that same year. Christine was officially annexed in 1954, though the elementary school in Christine did not close until 1961 (Atascosa History Committee 37-38).

As district enrollment grew, the downtown campus location became more crowded and less desirable. Trustees began buying and trading city lots at the southern edge of town in preparation for building a new campus, and in 1953, the first buildings were constructed on what is still the current site of the district’s only campus, housing students from Pre-Kindergarten

through Grade 12 on an extensive campus that also boasts three libraries, an administrative building, two gymnasiums, well-maintained athletic fields, as well as buildings housing a variety of vocational, band, and athletic programs and activities. Jourdanton prides itself on being one of the few remaining school districts in the state operating under this single-campus concept, which helps foster a sense of community at all levels. It is not uncommon for high school students to see their elementary and junior-high aged siblings during the school day, as cafeterias and gymnasiums are used for all grade levels, and high school students often volunteer to mentor younger students in academic and athletic activities. Trustees have maintained a rigorous schedule of building additions and maintenance on the current campus to keep pace with the school's population growth. The most recent addition is the high school science wing, added in 2001, which brought the district's square footage of buildings to 224,725 (McAllister).

While the statistics above tell part of the JISD story, it is the stories of the people -- faculty, staff, and students -- that are at the heart of Jourdanton's continued vigor as a school. From the outset, this was a community school, grounded in the values of the families who chose this area in which to establish their homes, businesses, farms, and ranches. The frontier was still a fresh memory as the school and community developed. As proof, a handwritten oath of office after his election as school board trustee written by W. J. Miles and submitted to the school board in November of 1923 includes the following statement: "I do further solemnly swear that . . . I being a citizen of this state, have not fought a duel with deadly weapons with this state nor out of it, nor have I sent or accepted a challenge to fight a duel with deadly weapons, nor have I acted as second in carrying a challenge . . ." In a post-911 world, the concept of dueling seems foreign, but in 1923, South Texas was still very much a rough-and-tumble place, and parents

obviously wanted to ensure that their children's education was entrusted to men of honor who chose to avoid violence.

Trustees were expected to interview and hire the best administrators and teachers available for the students under their care. Superintendents, principals, and faculty members were held to high standards as role models. Early board decisions make it evident that Jourdanton was not immune from outside political and social issues. Segregation was a fact of life for black students until the late 1950s, and Hispanic students were taught in a separate "Mexican first grade" as well. Women also faced an uphill struggle. Females applying for teaching positions were expected to meet rigorous behavior standards. Only single females were hired until the World War II era, and even then married women were hired only when no other option was available. An application by Miss Laura B. Roten for the position of Superintendent was considered by the board in 1921, but rejected, according to the board's minutes, because "it was the opinion of the board that it would be inadvisable to employ a lady as Superintendent" (Minutes Vol. I: 101). Between 1926 and 1940, several female teachers were reprimanded and asked to resign when they chose to marry while under school contract, though their husbands, also employed by the district, were not dealt with so harshly.

World War II also took a toll on Jourdanton. Several teachers were released from their contracts when they enlisted or were called to serve, and a poignant note in the Aug. 10, 1942, board minutes marked the discontinuation of the high school athletics program "for the duration," perhaps as a result of a number of our young men enlisting in the military and the need for rationing fuel and supplies for the war effort (Minutes Vol. II: 256).

Despite such conflicts and controversies, the district continued to prosper, and as the years passed, many of its students chose to attend colleges and "normal schools," then return to

teach the next generations of students in their home town. One such is Mrs. Mary Isabella Miles Williams. Just two years old when her family moved to Jourdanton, she completed her 11-year public school student experience, as well as her entire educational career, in the Jourdanton schools. After graduating from Mary Hardin Baylor College, she was hired by trustees in 1940 to teach at the elementary level. Two years later, following the outbreak of World War II, she spent several years working for the War Price and Rationing Board. However, after her marriage, she was asked by the district to return to teaching, and remained as an English teacher at the junior high level for the rest of her career until her retirement in 1976 (Williams). Nor is she the only teacher to spend an entire teaching career within the Jourdanton district. Others, such as Judy Johnson, Robert Chaney, and Norman Borth, joined the secondary school faculty in Jourdanton in the late sixties, and remain active and honored faculty today, more than 40 years later, teaching the children and even grandchildren of their earlier students. Such continuity adds to the sense of “family” that is so much a part of the Jourdanton academic experience.

Besides instilling moral values in its students, Jourdanton has also emphasized strong academic achievement, and has taken the lead in developing both college-preparatory and vocational programs designed to place its small-city students on equal footing with those from larger, more metropolitan districts. The first agricultural science teacher was Woodrow W. Davis, hired for the 35-36 school year. Though a shortage of funds to meet his salary of \$150 a month led to the cancellation of the class at the end of the first semester, this was the beginning of a strong agriculture education program, enhanced by FFA participation at all levels (Minutes Vol II: 139). Today, Jourdanton’s FFA and ag programs are among the most active in the state. The school has also offered home economics, business, and technology classes from its earliest years, creating students with marketable skills across the job spectrum. FHA/FCCLA members

and UIL academic team members add to those skills through interscholastic competitions from local to national level. Jourdanton graduates have gone on to become world-class chefs, respected lawyers, NASA researchers, award-winning journalists and novelists, and groundbreaking professional athletes. Many more have chosen to return to the classroom as educators themselves, their career choice a tribute in itself to their own former teachers. Perhaps even more significantly, almost every student who receives a diploma from Jourdanton I.S.D. becomes a productive citizen of this community and the world.

Jourdanton High School was one of the first in the area to offer adult education classes for community residents who needed G.E.D. certification. Pre-AP, Advanced Placement and Dual-credit college courses in all core curriculum areas prepare students for success at the college and university level. An all-level music and band program has been one of Jourdanton's proudest and most cherished traditions. Varsity athletes regularly earn team and individual honors for themselves and the school while developing interpersonal skills as well as physical ones. Though originally known as the Jourdanton Chaparrals, a reference to the roadrunners native to this region, the school's mascot was changed to the Jourdanton Indians in 1937. John T. Pesek, a 1938 graduate, recalled in an August 2010 note to the school's Alumni Association that the name change actually resulted as this class chose its senior ring design in 1937. "We wanted to have a mascot depicted on the side of the ring and were looking for a design with a chaparral. There were none, but one with a depiction of the profile of an Indian Chief caught our attention -- not unlike what was on the Indian Chief writing tablet in grade school . . . After much discussion, we concluded that the only way that (emblem) would make sense was to change our name, so we did. Obviously, we were oblivious of political correctness . . . Had we anticipated

(that the girls teams would be called the Squaws) I wonder if we would have persisted in that name change. But the rings really were attractive.”

In the past 100 years, the world has undergone more political, sociological, and technological changes than in all the years of civilization before. Jourdanton I.S.D. has provided a much needed link, connecting the valuable lessons of our past with the modern, fast-paced world around us today. Lana E. Collavo, Ed. D., currently serves as the district’s first female superintendent, heading a faculty and staff of more than 150. From tiny frontier school to Recognized 2A status, Jourdanton I.S.D. has maintained a connection for and between generations, serving as the steady, dependable heartbeat of a still vibrant and growing community as it moves into another century of service.

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