

Historian recalls Farmington High of old

BY DIANE GALE ANDREAS
SPECIAL WRITER

As she approaches the new millennium, Kathryn Briggs looks back at more than a century worth of ties to Farmington area schools. Her mother Minnie Cox graduated from Farmington High School.



Briggs' mother Minnie Cox graduated from Farmington High School in 1898 and was one of only three in her class.

Her certificate of graduation included 28 courses, some of which are foreign to students today, like "orthography," a language study.

Every morning Briggs walked to Grand River and hopped on the trolley to school. She attended Noble, a one-room school, until it burned down when she was in the fifth grade. Briggs went on to graduate in 1929 from Farmington High School, where Farmington Place Retirement Center is now located.

"Their parking lot is where our tennis courts were," said Briggs, the Farmington Hills Historical Commission chairwoman.

The legacy continued when Briggs graduated with the daughter of one of her mother's classmates. Coincidentally, that woman's children and Briggs' children also graduated from Farmington High School. There have been a lot of changes since those early years. Today, Farmington area schools boast three high schools, and the district is expected to graduate 837 students in 2000.

Briggs, who still lives on her grandfather's property in the house her parents built in 1924, said that when she attended school there was a strong sense

of camaraderie. "It was a feeling of togetherness," she said. "People were more pleasant in those days. There's more violence now in general, but probably not so much in the Farmington schools."

In the Roaring Twenties high school girls played all the same sports that the boys played, except football. Briggs recalls her class raising money by selling Jello and candy to go on a field trip to Washington, D.C.

While the trip was an excursion steeped in politics, Briggs said, students today are more aware of what's going on in the world.

"I think the students are more politically minded than we were and possibly that's because of television and radio," she said. "And more people are going to college today than they did then."

Graduates at 16
Briggs, who graduated at 16 because she dropped two grades, was one of the few who had a higher education. She attended the College of the City of Detroit, which is now Wayne State University. Briggs went on to teach grade school and special education in Farmington area schools. Her mother taught first through eighth grades in a one-room school in Southfield. At that time only a high school diploma was needed to teach school, Briggs said.

As for the future, Briggs imagines there will be more sophisticated tools to teach children.

"I'd like to see more technology, which they're starting right now, and I think they'll continue," she said.

So much has changed in the last century, Briggs recalled how her father was intrigued by the radio.

Amazed by radio
"I remember my dad being

amazed by radio, and he said that one day they'll be able to send pictures," Briggs said with a chuckle.

In fact, Farmington area high school students are offered classes that are available to them by satellite.

"Basically what you've got today is the difference in the complexity of the amount of information that is available, according to Judith White, Farmington Public Schools assistant superintendent for instructional services.

"Look at the information explosion," she added, referring to the enormous amount of data available and the speed at which it changes. Still, the basic requirements of English, math and science classes are the backbone of the curriculum, just as they were when Briggs graduated.

One big change, Briggs said, is the recently implemented block scheduling that allows students to remain in one class for 80 minutes a few times weekly instead of shorter intervals five days weekly. The program has been adopted at Farmington and North Farmington high schools. The only similarities between schools a century ago and today are that they have students, teachers and learning expectations, White said.

"We have an expanded program that includes more music and art," she added. "We have expanded world language offerings, like Japanese and Russian."

In the near future, she said, students will be able to take courses from the Internet.

"It's the complexity both of the information the kids are supposed to learn and the tools they are learning it with," White said.

"The whole world is open to them as a learning community. Before it was isolated to one teacher, one classroom and the kids."



Old and older: Below, this is how the old Farmington High School looked from 1918 to 1953. It is where Kay Briggs attended school. She graduated in 1929. At left, the Old Union School was built in 1888 and burned to the ground in 1918. Kay Briggs' mother Minnie Cox graduated from this school in 1898. She was one of only three students in her graduating class. Her course load included classes like orthography—a language study.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAY BRIGGS



Artists club to meet Wednesday at library

The Farmington Artist Club will meet at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 13, at the Farmington Hills Library. Mary Stephenson will be the guest speaker.

Stephenson has served eight years at the Detroit Institute of Arts and also on the University of Michigan School of Art and Alumni Association boards. She

has an master of arts degree and a master of fine arts degree in painting and museum practice and teaches at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

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