

End of an era

<http://www.theadvocate.com/features/50906157.html>



[Show Caption](#) **ARTHUR D. LAUCK/THE ADVOCATE**

Former Robert E. Lee High School teacher Nancy Jo Porrier, second from left, and alumni, from left, Ray Smith, Lynn Greeson Mitchell, Gordon Ellis, Miriam Maxwell Juban and Brent Norwood Caldwell recall the early years after the school opened in 1959.

Lee High alumni recall shuttered school's opening

- By [CAROL ANNE BLITZER](#)
- Advocate staff writer
- Published: Jul 16, 2009 - Page: 1D

Robert E. Lee Junior-Senior High School opened in the fall of 1959 to the oohs and aahs of students, parents and architects with the U.S. Office of Education, which recognized it as an outstanding example of the adaptation of a building to a natural site.

That site includes a deep ravine through the center of the property and a swamp on the property's edge.

Fifty years later, Lee High is no more. In May, the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board voted 9-1 to close the facility.

Even though state LEAP test scores had improved over the past years, the school did not reach the state's minimum performance score of 60. The risk was great that the state would take over the school.

Enrollment was also down. Lee High was designed for 1,500 students but closed with only 630.

It was a sad day for thousands of students who attended Lee High over the decades, especially the small group of alumni, now in their 60s, who were there when it opened.

Lee High was designed in the “California style” on a 26-acre tract the school board had purchased in 1940, when real estate in the Highland Road area was cheap.

“Architecturally, it was an excellent design,” said Nancy Jo Poirrier, who taught at the school from 1959-1966. “Functionally it was a disaster. It was a California design built in a Louisiana swamp.”

One of the biggest problems was that the ravine was 8 feet lower than Lee Drive, on which the property fronted. Engineers concluded it would be cheaper to build the school over the ravine than to fill it.

The architectural firm of Miller, Smith and Associates designed the building, which was constructed for a mere \$12.67 per square foot, about the same cost of building an average brick house at the time. The total price was \$2,282,430 plus \$15,000 for landscaping and \$58,000 for the football field, bleachers, outdoor lighting and paved play area.

Rainy days at Lee High were a mess, especially when the low areas flooded. “The football and track field was higher than the gym, and the gym was higher than the classrooms,” said Miriam Maxwell Juban of the Class of 1964.

The gym flooded before it was ever used. Juban’s classmate Ray Smith, who had come to Lee High from St. Agnes Catholic School, remembers walking into the gym on his first day of school and seeing buckled floors.

“My first job at the school was to knock down the floor boards and stack them in the corner,” he said. “That was our P.E. for the first two days of school.”

The first day the school opened, a school bus got stuck in the drive. The elevated walkways between buildings were so low that the buses couldn’t get through.

Neighborhood school

Lee High was built to relieve crowding at Baton Rouge High School. Students who lived in the vicinity of the school as well as students who moved into the school system in the summer of 1959 were assigned to the new facility, which originally had grades 7-12.

“It was so traumatic that Lee High was opening that I considered moving to my grandmother’s house in Roseland Terrace so I could go to Baton Rouge High,” said Brent Norwood Caldwell, who graduated from Lee High in 1962. “You didn’t have a choice. If you lived in that district and were in the ninth or 10th grade, you had to go to Lee High.”

But from the day Caldwell entered Lee High, she loved the school. It was one large neighborhood school.

“For the most part, we had all gone to school together before Lee High,” Juban said. “The parents worked for Ethyl or LSU or things related in that way.”

Margaret Aby Carroll, of Fort Worth, a member of the Class of 1964, recalled by e-mail the overhead fans in the classrooms in the days before schools were air-conditioned. "That was very ahead of its time but only helpful if you got to sit on the row of seats nearest the windows," she wrote.

Boys were permitted to smoke in a special "bullpen." However, "about the worst infraction for girls was getting caught smoking," Carroll wrote.

In 1965, fellow students administered haircuts to two freshmen in the "bullpen." To revenge the action, the two boys burned down the dome-shaped auditorium, which also housed the administrative offices, records room, band room and choir room. The fire caused more than a half million dollars in damages and earned the two 15-year-olds a stay in the Louisiana Training Institute in Monroe.

The auditorium was rebuilt and used until 1992. It was demolished in 1999.

Poirrier was sponsor of the booster group, the Confederettes. "I remember the extremely strong mothers' club for the Confederettes," she said. "I call those years my Camelot years. I think they were the Camelot years for the school, too. Teaching was so easy. Children were very eager to get the information. You didn't have to worry whether children did their work or not."

Juban recalls a day that she and Caldwell's sister, deSha Norwood, decided to "play hooky."

"In those days, everybody walked to school," Juban said. The two truants left school and walked home, but when they got there, they realized that all of their friends were at school, and they had nothing to do.

"So we walked back," she said. "We didn't want to miss school."

Carroll recalled the great "spirit rallies" on Fridays before football games. Occasionally there were appearances by the Gooferettes, a group of male students including Lad Hawkins, Fred Alexander and John deBessonnet, who "made fun" of the Confederettes.

Emily Grant was the school secretary, who answered the phone, "Robert E. Lee, Grant speaking."

"She was the dearest thing," Caldwell said. "She loved everybody."

"She ran every principal," Poirrier said.

Rather than change classes to bells, at Lee, students changed classes to music. "When we were playing a certain team, we'd play their theme song," said Lynn Greeson Mitchell of the Class of 1964.

Caldwell fondly recalls some of the early teachers, her "parade of saints," among them Helen Church, Blanche Sandefer, Sindee Weaver, Mary Belle Smith, Margie Dyer, Helen Brown and Fern Loupe.

"In those days, Fern had no children, and the cheerleaders would go over and spend the night at her house," Caldwell said.

"You couldn't do that today," Juban said.

From the day the school opened, it was known for its outstanding music program under the guidance of band director Harry Evans and Drew Shaw, who led the choir.

“The music program was strong until the day the school closed,” Poirrier said.

Integration

For the white students who attended Lee High in its earliest years, the school was a “wonderful place.” But for the four black students who integrated Lee High in the fall of 1963, feelings were different.

Freya Anderson Rivers, now of Lansing, Mich., recalled her Lee High days as a “harrowing, nightmarish experience” in an Advocate interview in January.

“The four of us were pushed and shoved when we walked down the hallways. We were called names. The other kids spit on us, and when we sat down at a desk in a classroom, all of the other students moved away,” said Rivers, who did not return phone calls from The Advocate.

Smith disagrees with Rivers’ statement that the students “harassed her and threw stuff at her.”

“When all this started, they took us out and told us that there were federal marshals at the school,” he said. “We were so scared.”

“We just went about our business,” Mitchell said.

The black students arrived each day in taxis. They ate together in the cafeteria.

“Think about how lonely it had to be for them,” Poirrier said. “You have to remember how it all happened from her (Rivers’) point of view.”

Jazz funeral

A group of Lee High alumni arranged a Louisiana-style jazz funeral “to give ‘the general’ the classy, respectful sendoff he deserves,” said Judy Collins, one of the organizers of the event.

Trumpeter John Gray will lead a procession through the campus on Friday, July 17. Alumni will gather at 6 p.m. in the semicircular front driveway on Lee Drive. Randy Walsh will end the event with a performance of jazz music.

It’s a fitting tribute to the school so many call their alma mater.

“I remember how beautiful the school was when we first started,” Carroll wrote. “Its design was very forward-thinking, and we were all so proud to be there, even if the gym floor was flooded by rain several times and the roof on the auditorium leaked.”