

Interview with Esther Dawe concerning schooling in Foster City at  
its beginnings.

In partial fulfillment for U.P. History  
for  
Dr. Slavcheff

Bryant S. Varney

April 22, 1989

Longfellow school

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This is a transcription of an interview between myself and Esther Dawe which took place on February 4, 1989. Mrs. Dawe completed her elementary education at Longfellow school and went on to become an educator. She returned to Foster City after retirement and still resides there. The interview has been edited for clarity and organization. All indented material is directly quoted from Esther Dawe.

During the logging era, Foster City, a small town of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, sprang up to help fulfill the need of wood for the ever growing United States. A demand for labor was also needed and many immigrants (mainly Scandinavian) accepted the invitation to come and settle in the area.

Most [people of Foster City] were immigrants. Their lives consisted of church, school, and home. Maybe I should say home, church, and school. They centered everything around [this]. They were interested in keeping their home relatively a good home. They were religious people who took interest in church activities.

Was this a Breen Township school?

Yes, it was. It was an original set up for Breen Township...

The first school building was located at the top of a hill overlooking the sawmill area below. It was a one room school. I have no estimate of when it was built nor the length of time it was used. But possibly built 1895 and used until 1910 when the Longfellow school building was completed, having been built during the year 1909...

[To call the school "Longfellow"], we had a special program and some of us recited poems from Longfellow. We had a lovely program. We each brought a dime to school, everybody who

could, and the principal bought a statue of the bust of Longfellow, which was displayed in the lobby of the first floor entrance.

Who started the first schoolhouse?

The Morgan Lumber & Cedar Company owned Foster City and also the industrial plant that was in it, which was a saw mill. When they came here, the Superintendent was really very gracious about a lot of things. That company gave the land for the first school house in Foster City and for several others that were built in the area. So, it was not necessary to purchase a location. That was a big dividend at the time because the people who had settled here were busy getting their homes built, and getting settled...

I don't know who set up the first school system but I would say that since my father [Swan J. Peterson] served on the school board for 25 years, he was certainly among the very first people. He and other people, who were on the school board, always involved the Superintendent of the company.

Tell me about the setting of the schoolhouse. Longfellow school was beautifully built. We were comfortable there, the heating system and everything. There was a furnace. I suppose it was a wood furnace but I don't recall wood piles around the schoolhouse...

We had five rooms in this school. There were desks, [and

these furnishings were excellent just like the schoolhouse, well built... We didn't always fit the desks... We didn't have adjustable seats but it didn't matter to us. They were in good condition. There were plenty of textbooks and chalk boards galore.

Did you have the American flag?

Oh yes, and we said the pledge of allegiance every morning happily. We were very patriotic people.

Did you have any supplies given to you by the state or federal government?

No, all of it was purchased from tax money.

Can you tell me how much of the taxes were set aside to fund the school?

No, I haven't any idea on that score.

Where did the funds come from for running the school and paying the teachers every year?

They came from taxes. Though the taxes were low at the time, there were times when they were building when they had to bond and get borrowed money to build the school houses. That was a regular consistent custom, but every building was paid for within a length of time. That was astounding to me because the people were pressed for money. However, they were interested in education and they were willing to support the school.

Where did the money come from for the textbooks and literature based children's books?

Everything came out of the tax money that was paid to the school...

The wages at that time were not exorbitant as you may guess.

Give me a rough estimate.

\$.75--\$1.00 an hour would be considered very good...

Was the school a common school, or an early modern elementary school?

It was an early modern elementary school. We were in session ten months. We started in early September and we were finished late in June.

What was the enrollment for the school in its first years?

There were five teachers.

Were there any male teachers?

The principal was a male... [John Wood was the principal of Longfellow school from its start in 1910 to roughly 1920.

There were no male teachers during Longfellow's first years of operation. Beginning in the 1920's, two male teachers were hired to teach math and physics in the upper grades.]

I would say that the average teacher had at least 25 to 30 pupils. There was more than one grade in each room, of course. The general pattern for grouping the students into



rooms was: (kindergarten), (first, second, third), (fourth, fifth, sixth), (seventh, eighth), and (ninth, tenth) grades...

We had no kindergarten when I went to school. When I started, I had to start in 1st grade, but after my class, they did have a kindergarten and it was in session all day. They are reverting to that philosophy now... Kindergarten began in the years 1912-13. It became an important program in educating the young because more workmen had come into the Foster City area and enrollment at Longfellow was increasing...

We were in session ten months. We started in early September and we were finished late in June.

Was attendance compulsive and mandatory?

Yes, it was through 8th grade. They had a truant officer who would look into that and investigate the reasons for absence.

The length of a day was 7 hours?

Mm-hmm, 8:30 A. M. to 3:30 P. M.

Tell me roughly what was the amount of miles that the average student had to walk to school.

Well I'll begin with us. We had two and a half miles to walk to school...

Unless the winter weather was bad, we walked and started out quite early. You can imagine how early we had to get up since

we had to bundle up and walk two and a half miles.

How did you get up? Did you have an alarm clock?

Oh no.

Besides the teacher, who set up the classroom curriculum? Was there some agency that provided regulations and standards such as the State?

There were restrictions from the State.

The University of Michigan?

No, the Department of Education in Lansing...

A great deal of the curriculum was set up by the Board of Education in Lansing and was followed beautifully in this area. I know that because otherwise we wouldn't have been able to take examinations that we had not previously seen and that's where I will tell you this little incident. The teachers were so concerned about those examinations, I think it made them adhere more to the set up curriculum than we do in this day and age...

One evidence of that was that when we reached our 8th grade final days in school, they sent examinations up from Lansing...

Now I'll tell you about this incident. It happened that when I was in the 8th grade, the day our teacher was expecting the examination questions to arrive [from Lansing] came. She asked me if I would stay at the store at noon until the mail

came in so that I could bring that special envelope. I waited for the mail and did I ever carry that carefully because I knew what was in it. When I got to school, she put it in a locked box, never opened it, just put it in that locked box... 'cause I was standing right there so I was certain of that. In other words, not even the teachers could look into that envelope to see what the questions were like. We had questions in all of the subjects: math, history, English, spelling...

Then, the day we took our examinations, they required two days because, you see, we had to cover all subjects. Another person had to come in the room to supervise--not the regular teacher but another person from one of the other grades...

Now, another little tack onto this story of getting the [test] questions to school, on the day that the teacher expected the results, again she asked me to stay at the store until the mail came, and that day the mail was late. I, who had never had a tardy mark in my life, couldn't believe that she would ask me to stay and wait for mail. Her husband was a clerk at the store so he kept telling me, "Don't worry if you're going to be tardy because they've asked you to stay and it isn't your fault if you're tardy." When the reports came, I went to school and it felt so strange to walk alone and see no children and getting to school and creeping in there with everybody busy talking and [involved] with their subjects, and here I come tardy. But anyway the results were excellent for

me that day because she did open the grade results and told me I was then the valedictorian of the 8th grade class. So I had a happy day in spite of being seemingly tardy.

Did the school in Foster City have any interaction with Northern Michigan University (a Normal school then)?

The only one little connection with Northern...as it was called Normal School then at the time...was my father, [Swan J. Peterson] who was very active in community affairs and greatly interested in education. As I said, he did know some of the instructors at Northern. There was one man called Casey C. Wiggins. How it happened that my father knew him I don't know. When I was graduated from the 8th grade, we had regular exercises and they were usually in the evening. For transportation, my father had to go to Marquette to pick C. Wiggins up and bring him down here. C. Wiggins gave the address and it was excellent. We were thrilled to have somebody who was a professor at a college come to this area because that wasn't usual. He stayed here overnight at this house and then my father took him back the next day. That's one faintly remembered connection with Northern otherwise there was no communication back and forth that I know of.

How were the teachers picked?

By application and interview. I know about that too because my father said often that they wanted the absolute best that they could find and they advertized in the Iron Mountain paper for applications. I think maybe that was my father's connection

with Northern now that I realize it. I suppose there was a bureau there at Northern that could recommend teachers. But anyway we had, overall, par excellent teachers, absolutely...

They had what I had, a two year certificate which was called a "life certificate". They all had to have it, they had to be certified. Some had prior experience, and some had no experience before they came here.

What were the rules and regulations for the teacher?

Some of [the teachers] were married. The company saw to it that they could rent a house. Some of them were single and they stayed with other people who would take in a teacher, house them and give them board and room. [There were no restrictions on clothing for the children.] In that day and age it was what your parents wanted you to wear. [The teacher usually wore a dress or skirt and blouse, but it didn't mean they were ankle length.]

Were the school hours set up subject by subject or was it an integrated curriculum?

No, the time limit was there for each subject. [Each subject was independent from another.] Each teacher could set up her own schedule. Usually for the most part, we had our math, spelling, reading, and English in the morning, and then we'd have reading in the afternoon again and the remaining subjects.

Did the teachers at Longfellow school focus on "back to the basics"?

Definitely, very very much. But we had the little fringe benefits, too, you know. We had science including nature studies. I'd say we had a little touch of economics because we always talked about home, how things were in the home, and how the finances were always set aside for food, shelter, clothing, and heat. We definitely had civics and government classes and an agriculture course. English was definitely stressed along with math and spelling. We had many spelling bees.

Were you exposed to any of the humanities?

I'll tell you we were lucky to have the subjects provided in the curriculum. We left [home] before 7:00 in the morning and our day was long, 'til about 3:30 as it usually was, but then by the time we got home it was late so I think [the teachers] were fortunate to get in all the usual subjects. There were no classes in economics that I know of, but what we did have in adjunct to the regular curriculum were people who were 4-H leaders. They taught us sewing, and something about cooking, and very similar projects to what they have now. The boys had a handicraft club. If you could join the 4-H [or the handicraft club], you had something other than just the regular curriculum.

So did the school also prepare students for agricultural work?

Yes, absolutely. Agriculture was one of the required

subjects...  
Our curriculum included an art class once a week and that teacher had to be versatile because if you're in an area where you have limited supplies.

Did you have a lot of writing assignments, journal writings..?

Yes, we had much writing to do. I would say that was the day of the Palmer Method. We had penmanship classes three times a week learning perfect script..

Did you read a lot of children's literature and you were able to choose the books you wanted?

Yes. [This is very important to the language arts program today.] We had a library as I said so we had library books that we could check out and take home.

Did the children back then have problems with today's communicable diseases and those which we do not have anymore?

They certainly didn't have vaccinations and such. I wouldn't say that absenteeism was very great at all. One disease that was common then was diphtheria, which was a throat inflammation. The fortunate thing about it was that the Morgan Lumber and Cedar Co. had a doctor in town and that is something we don't have in this modern day. He was a very very good doctor. His name was Dr. Moll. He was a family physician so he would make house calls morning, noon, or night. He kept a lid on infectious diseases. A quarantine was in effect if anyone in

your home had measles or any other contagious disease. There was a big pink printed placard placed on the outside of the house. They were more cautious about contagion then, but because of the vaccines now, it presents a protection not available earlier.

Did the doctor ever visit the school?

Yes, and in our health classes they would always have him for one interview of some kind. Sometimes it was an assembly and he would talk to all of us at least once every year. We also had a visiting nurse or dentist from Iron Mountain who would come and check the children.

Were all the students in a particular classroom mainstreamed?

I would say that in every classroom there were some who were unable to keep up with the average students. Since we all ate lunches at school, the noon hour is when the teacher would usually set aside some time for helping students. I think some people weren't recognized as needing more help. From Iron Mountain or Escanaba, we had no connections that would bring in specialized help, and at the time, learning labs were not incorporated. Having second, third, and fourth grade in one room, you had to be versatile. I think it sounds like an old-fashioned idea but I do think there was some merit to us having more than one grade in the room. If I had time or thought, I would listen to what was going on in the other grade and I would become interested. I learned much more than what I should have learned in that one grade because I



took on what I heard from the other students.

Did the teacher mainly lecture, or was there interaction with students?

There was interaction. It certainly was not so set that the teacher couldn't deviate from the lecture. If some topic came up that was interesting, we could converse on that topic as it related to the general lesson.

Did the teachers often act as a facilitator in the classroom?

Absolutely.

When a student gave a wrong answer to a question, did the teacher say, "you're wrong", and give them a negative attitude or was it considered a miscue?

They helped them achieve the answer. They said: "let's look at this way. Maybe we can figure this out from a different stand point..." It was a very positive atmosphere.

Did you have trouble applying what you learned to the real world? Was much of the information trivial or hypothetical? Did she apply it to your surroundings?

No it wasn't trivial or hypothetical. I think we learned to apply it because we had a lot of nature study. I applied a great deal of what I learned in school to my [immediate] surroundings and daily life.

Can you tell me some of the qualities of teachers that made them effective?

Compassion with a big C. Teachers were interested in somebody who acted as if they were hurting or sick or whatever. That teacher would always take that person aside and find out what it was and go about properly to find out if it was something in the home. Compassion with a big C is one trait that most of them evidenced. I don't know really how they controlled the children, because at that time there were boys as tall as the teacher was, some of them who started school late or if they lived far out and couldn't come when they were too small... Teachers had to be good disciplinarians, not strict but very good because we felt we wanted to respond to what our teacher expected of us. We wanted to please them. While a teacher was teaching another subject or group, we finished our assignment...

Can you tell me how the discipline level for the school was?

I don't know how the discipline was controlled but we had quiet rooms, conducive to study. [With the absence of television and radio, it was a very different lifestyle then. Children of the Foster City community were well disciplined and had work assignments after school and on weekends.]

Can you tell me anything else why the teachers were effective?

I think the teachers were also very kindly acclimated in the community because they knew everybody and they made their

point by going to different gatherings. A lot of the homes were on the outskirts of Foster City and [the people] were more timid about going to these things. We did not have parent [-teacher] conferences, but we certainly had report cards. The report cards for the most part while I was going to school were E for excellent, G for good and so on in the early grades and from then on we got an average mark like 94, 89 and so on from 5th grade and on...

Fortunately, we had a 9th grade and a 10th grade here that were accredited at any high school in Michigan. Any of us who wanted to go on to school did so by at least attending 9th or 10th grade. Strangely enough, many of the children thought they were all finished when they completed the 8th grade. In my 9th grade classes and 10th grade classes, I would say the average was 10 to 15 pupils. [These classes were also held in the Longfellow school in the basement due to lack of space.]

So 10th grade was the highest level for the school?

That was the highest level.

Then where would students go if they wanted a higher education?

That was up to the family. Parents would have to take over the responsibility of their children's higher level of education.

After leaving Longfellow school, did most of the students go work for the Morgan Lumber and Cedar Co. or farming?

Mm-hmm, that's why this was not a poor community. Everybody had work who wanted work. Some did work for Morgan Company or in the timber industry. However, some left to work in other cities and various vocations.

Do you think the positive moral universe that existed in Foster City came with the type of community existing in Foster City?

It came along with the type of people who were here.

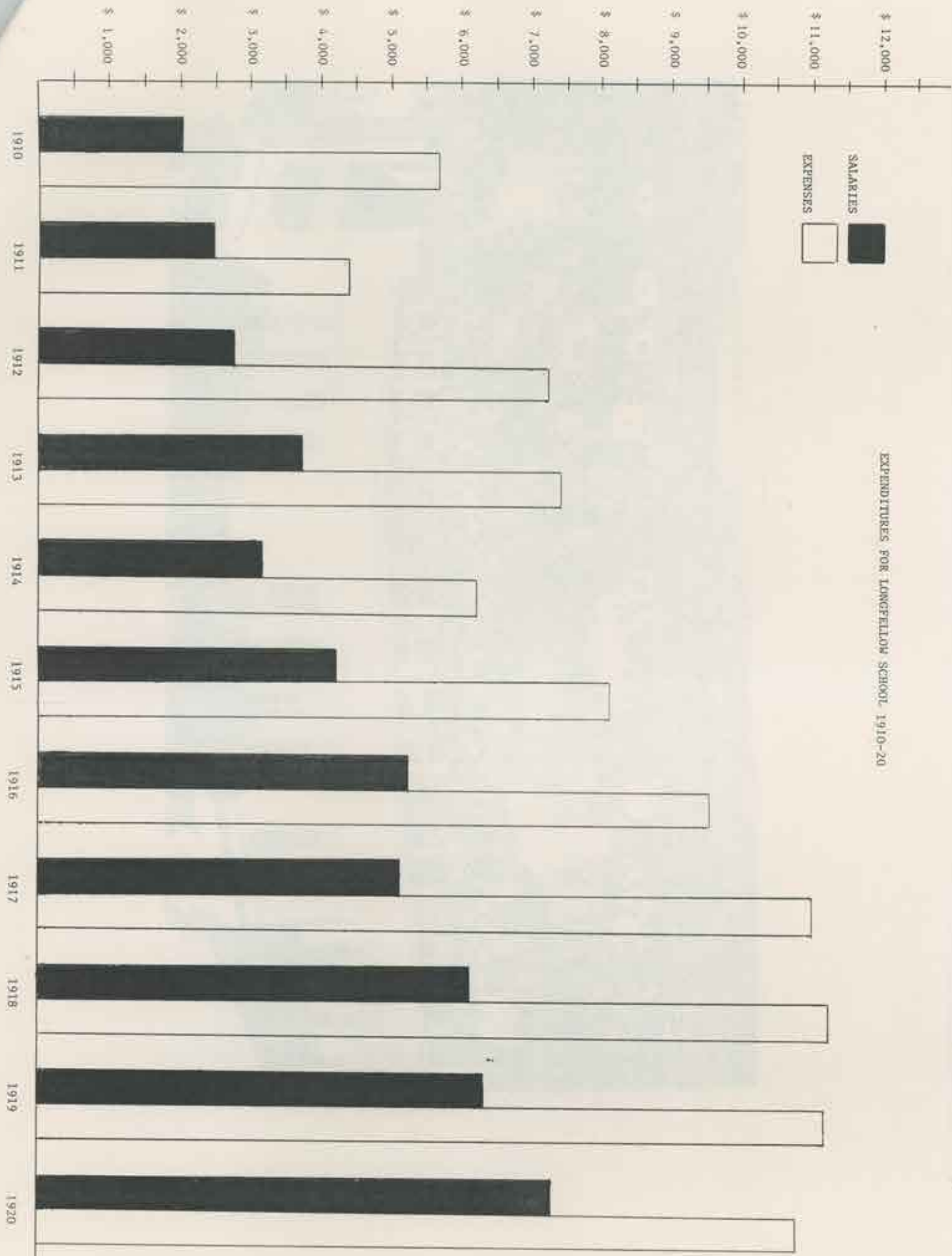
At its beginning, education and school sped up the process of Americanization in Foster City. Longfellow school provided a positive atmosphere for the children of the Foster City community to excel, while maintaining their parents' traditions. Although no longer in existence, Longfellow school remains in the hearts of many as a place where students could share, learn, and grow together.

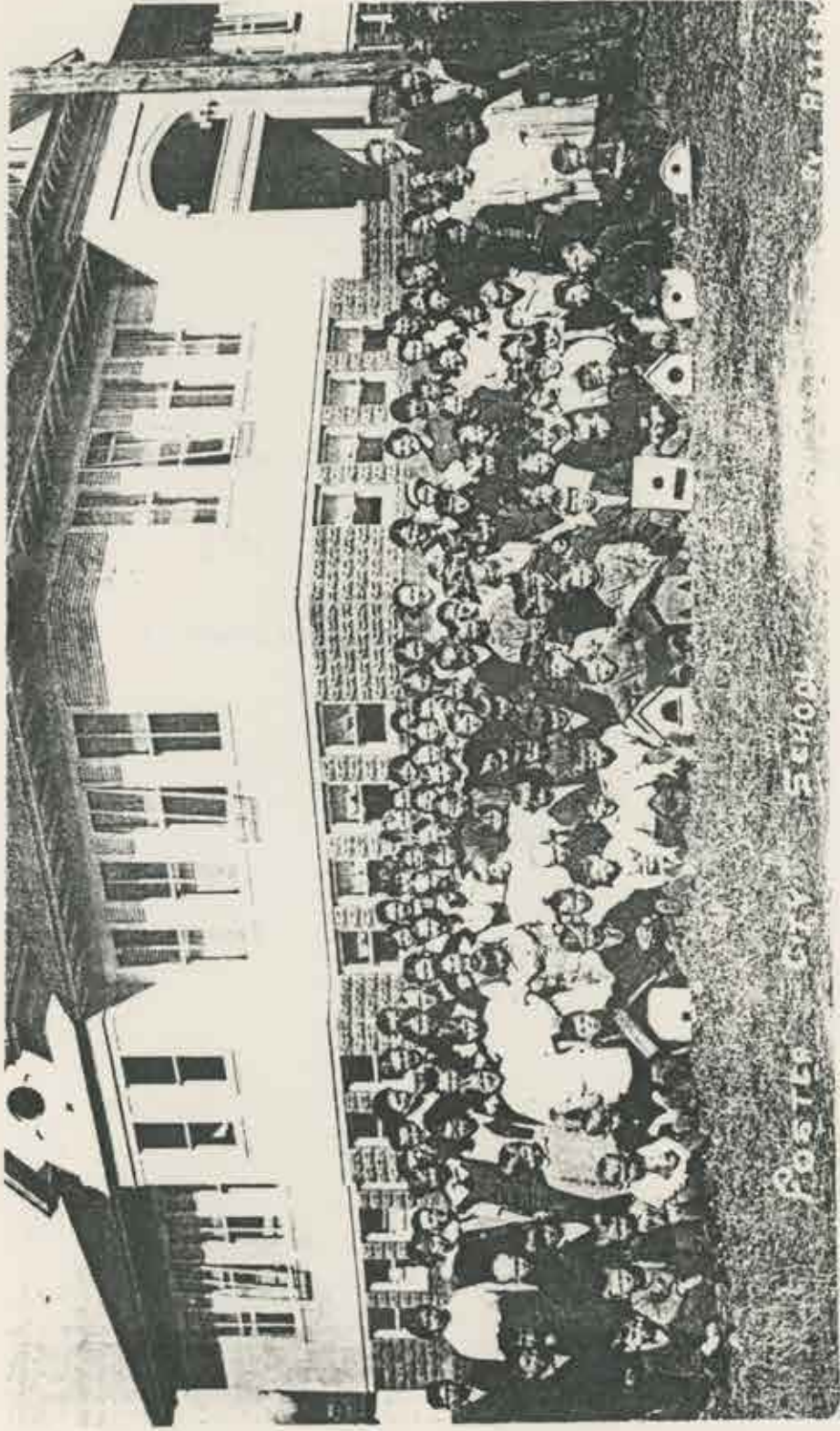
The following chart is the total salaries and expenses for Longfellow school for the years 1910-20. The totals reflect only amounts recorded in the Town Board Minutes. A bar graph is also included for visual comparison.

EXPENDITURES FOR LONGFELLOW SCHOOL 1910-20

SALARIES		EXPENSES	
1910	\$ 2,045.00	1910	\$ 5,794.00
1911	\$ 2,522.00	1911	\$ 4,414.00
1912	\$ 2,864.00	1912	\$ 7,316.00
1913	\$ 3,871.00	1913	\$ 7,473.00
1914	\$ 3,214.00	1914	\$ 6,239.00
1915	\$ 4,257.00	1915	\$ 8,174.00
1916	\$ 5,326.00	1916	\$ 9,566.00
1917	\$ 5,172.00	1917	\$ 11,034.00
1918	\$ 6,239.00	1918	\$ 11,211.00
1919	\$ 6,421.00	1919	\$ 11,175.00
1920	\$ 7,341.00	1920	\$ 10,792.00

EXPENDITURES FOR LONGFELLOW SCHOOL 1910-20





Longfellow School in 1916