

Back to School: Educating Langley's Pioneer Children

The third Langley Prairie School, 1927.
Credit: salishan Place by the River



Acquiring a formal education was often a challenge in British Columbia's colonial period. Only a handful of elementary schools existed, and it was not until the colony joined Canada in 1871 that a standardized system of education was developed.

The Public Schools Act of 1872 permitted communities throughout the recently created province to establish school districts and access provincial funding for school construction and teachers' salaries. Locally-elected school trustees were entrusted with the administration of provincial grants while the authorities in Victoria retained responsibility for the appointment and dismissal of teachers. Langley Prairie was among the first communities to take advantage of the scheme, erecting a building to serve Grades 1 through 8 in 1875. The new school was named Prairie School in recognition of its locale, with School Trustee J.H. Coulthard's daughter Florence serving as its first teacher.

Located near what is now Innes Plaza, Prairie School was typical of those built elsewhere in Langley. **Uninsulated and with just one room, a wood-burning stove, a few coal oil lamps, a handful of books, and outdoor plumbing, the building had little in common with the well-equipped and spacious schools that students**

attend today. Blackboards were a luxury. Students wrote on hand-held slate boards (mini chalkboards), scribblers being far too expensive for either the school board or local families to provide.

Early teachers had little training and were often just a few years older than their students, making discipline a challenge. **It was the poorly-paid teacher's responsibility – Florence Coulthard salary was just \$150 a year – not only to instruct her students, but also to fuel the stove, fetch water, and maintain the school building.** Early teachers seldom remained at Prairie School for more than a year. Rebellious students, truancy, parents who preferred their children to work on their farms rather than learn in school, and the significant expense of room and board often drove them to seek work elsewhere.

In its earliest days, Prairie School had a student population of just 13 students. A mere eight attended regularly, compelling the province to close the school in 1877. Although it reopened shortly afterward, the building burned to the ground just four years later. Rebuilt in 1881, low attendance forced the new school's closure and eventual sale in the early 1890s. Converted into a church and later into a store, the building now stands, quite unrecognizable, on the south side of the Fraser Highway.

With their own school closed, Langley Prairie's children attended a school east of the community, on 216th Street. In 1895, however, a new one-room school opened at the corner of today's 56th Avenue and 200th Street. Initially known as the Langley Prairie School, the building was renamed the Glencoe School in 1907. The building was replaced in 1915 by a new two-room structure on the Fraser Highway.

Like its predecessors, this new Langley Prairie School taught only the lower grades. Later additions increased the building's capacity and flexibility, allowing it to serve the community in other roles well into the present century.

By 1906 there were 15 elementary schools in the newly created Langley School District. It was not until 1909, however, that Langley's first high school class was organized. Initially meeting in temporary quarters in Murrayville, the school's students moved to a new building of their own in 1924. Located near the eastern end of today's one-way section of the Fraser Highway, the school was soon overcrowded. By the early 1940s, students attended in shifts, leading to demands for a new school which opened outside today's City in 1948.

- Warren Sommer



Students and teacher at the Langley Prairie (Glencoe) School c. 1890s
Credit: salishan Place by the River



Students and teacher at the Langley Prairie (Glencoe) School c. 1912.
Credit: salishan Place by the River