

Old Harmony Grove-Commerce School Buildings

[The Northeastern Railroad was completed through Harmony Grove, Ga. in 1876. Today the railroad company that owns the track route is the Norfolk Southern Railroad. This railroad today in Commerce, Ga. is one of the most notable aspects of “the city on the right track”.

Earlier, on an acre of land that was donated by C.W. Hood, the first two-story, two-room wooden building was erected in the community of Harmony Grove in 1874. This school was located just off South Elm Street next to First Baptist Church. The Harmony Grove Public School was built on the site of what later became the old Commerce Grammar School.

Later, the first brick school building was erected in 1888 four years after the community of Harmony Grove was incorporated into the city of Harmony Grove in 1884. This Harmony Grove School was later destroyed by fire in 1895. The contractor was McGinity of Athens, Ga.

The second brick school building for Harmony Grove School was constructed on the same site in the same year of 1895. The building was also destroyed by fire a few years later in 1903. This school had earlier been constructed by the contractors of Thurmond and Barber.

The third brick school, or HGS building was constructed once more on the same site in 1903 by W.T. Thurmond and once again was called the Harmony Grove Public School building.

In 1903, this new Harmony Grove Public School building was placed into operation housing grades (1-8) for the students of Harmony Grove, Georgia. In 1903 there were only four school systems in high school. Commerce later had high school grades Georgia that had a (9-11) by 1908-1909 along with the existing elementary classes in this building.

While new buildings were under construction, the school sessions were held in some local churches in 1895 and later in public buildings in the city in 1903.

These three brick buildings were the same size and similar in type, with classrooms and an office on the first floor and an auditorium, library, and other classrooms on the second level.

The above four buildings were all located off South Elm Street beside First Baptist Church.

On August 6, 1904, Harmony Grove was reincorporated and renamed Commerce because of the commercial and trading center that the area was becoming. However, numerous people in the community opposed the city’s name change, however, the city fathers pursued the matter.

Thus, the old Harmony Grove School site was now called the Commerce Public School in 1904-1908 and housed only grades (1-8). High school grades (9-11) were added about 1908.

In the year 1914, at the beginning of Mr. H.B. Carreker’s time as superintendent, two wings, one on each end of the structure, were added to provide more facilities for high school and lower grades. Sixteen new classrooms were added to the eight to ten rooms that already existed.] ^

^ --Source of all on this page ___ *History of Harmony Grove-Commerce* by Mr. Thomas (Tom) C. Hardman

The 80 yard football field behind the Commerce Public School was used in that capacity from 1909-1928 and also from 1940-46. However, because of the effects of The Great Depression in the area in the 1930's, Commerce abandoned the playing of football from 1929-1939. Also, Commerce did not play football in 1918 because of a Spanish Influenza epidemic in northeast Georgia that prevented many other schools in the state from playing football as well.

[The second story of the Commerce Public School had an auditorium in the center of the building. It also had a small stage and seating was of the three-section folding seat variety that was portable or movable enabling the auditorium to easily be transformed into a basketball court and therefore the holding of basketball practice there. A few games were played in this auditorium as well in the 1920's.] --Source__ *G B P*

[Additionally during World War II, war bond meetings and other events and functions of importance were also held in this Commerce Grammar School auditorium.] --Source__ *D B*

In 1936, the second new Commerce High School which was a WPA project under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration was completed and put into operation. This facility served as Commerce High School until the end of the 1956-1957 school year.

This Commerce High School in 1936 was located on Shankle Heights Road. This site is presently known as Ridling Field which is now a softball and baseball complex.

[The 12th grade was added at Commerce High School as well as across most of Georgia in the fall of 1951 with the first 12th grade class graduating CHS with 13 students in May of 1952.]
--Source__ *J H F*

The second CHS football field was constructed on the south side of the high school campus on Shankle Heights Road or behind the Commerce High School building site, and it served as the Commerce Tiger football stadium from 1947-1964.

[The older Commerce Public School facility that dated back to 1903 continued to house grades (1-7) following the completed construction of the new Commerce High School in 1936. This new high school was located on Shankle Heights Road in the city.] --Source__ *H S H*

Also in 1936, this older Commerce Public School facility located next to First Baptist Church which dated back to 1903 became known as the Commerce Grammar School.

[Additionally, back in 1927, a new auditorium building was erected. Shortly after construction, this facility was also used as a basketball gymnasium at the old Commerce Public School site. It was in use as a gym through the spring of 1942. This facility was located on the northwestern side of the public school building campus or back toward the downtown section of the city.

This additional acreage to the original school lot was purchased by the City of Commerce from Mr. J.A. Seegar for the purpose of building this new multi-purpose auditorium/gym.] ^

^ --Source__ *History of Harmony Grove-Commerce* by Mr. Thomas (Tom) C. Hardman

[In the fall of 1942, this auditorium/basketball facility was transformed into a grammar school or elementary school cafeteria (lunchroom) and was used for that purpose until the end of the 1969-1970 school year.

High school basketball was not played in Commerce during World War II because of the rationing of gas. The shortage of gas limited travel for school events. Basketball practice was resumed on dirt courts at the Commerce High School campus on Shankle Heights Road in the fall of 1945 following the end of the war.] ---Source ___ *W C*

This old Grammar School cafeteria facility is presently owned by First Baptist Church and is used as a fellowship hall/gym by the church for its members. Today, other community events are sometimes held there as well.

Commerce High School and later Commerce Junior High students were allowed to leave school on Shankle Heights Road and go back down Elizabeth Street and across the railroad tracks to this Commerce Grammar School cafeteria for lunch during the period of time of 1942 and through the spring of 1966.

Wow! Can you believe that students were allowed to leave school and walk across two double lanes of traffic as well as a railroad track to go to lunch and be expected to return across these same thoroughfares to the school without getting into trouble or even injured? Yes, it was a different day and era in that period of time.

Many CHS Junior-Senior Proms were held through the years during the spring in this building at the Commerce Grammar School cafeteria. Other events and ceremonies were also held at various times in this multi-purpose facility.

[From 1942-1955, Commerce did not have a basketball gymnasium. Basketball practice (1945-1955) was done outside on dirt courts, and sometimes arrangements were made for the boys and girls teams to travel to Ila or Maysville for practice in order for the team to build the basketball skills needed in order to perform adequately for the upcoming games.

Some designated home games were played at times at the Maysville gymnasium during this period of ten years that the city went without an official Commerce basketball gymnasium. This Maysville High School gym was located on the west side of the city just off and to the left of the Gillsville Highway.] ---Source ___ *A C*

In 1955, construction was begun on the new CHS gymnasium on Lakeview Drive. The first game was played in this facility in 1955. Construction for the new Commerce High School was begun in 1956 just a few yards from the gym site.

This third Commerce High School building was built on the south side of the city just off Jefferson Road on Lakeview Drive, and this new facility was opened in 1957. Mr. Amos Ward was the first janitor of this building. This CHS building served as the city's high school facility, until the NEW COMMERCE HIGH SCHOOL was completed in December-January of 2011.

Following the habitation of the new 1957 high school facility by the students and faculty, the (7-8) grades were moved also in this same year from the Commerce Grammar School complex just off South Elm Street to the old CHS building on Shankle Heights Road which now had become Commerce Junior High School. A few years later, the 6th grade was also transferred over from the Commerce Grammar School complex to this school site.

This Commerce Junior High facility served in that capacity from 1957 through January of 1972. This Commerce Junior High School later had a cafeteria facility built in the basement of the school where meals were served for students from 1966 through January of 1972.

On the night of January 4, 1972, the Commerce Junior High School on Shankle Heights Road caught on fire and burned to the ground. After a hard and tough week of preparation for the administration and faculty, the sixth grade was housed in the former J.L. Williams School, while the seventh grade was in the First Baptist Church area.

[Additionally, for a short period of time which was less than a month, the eighth grade was housed in the First United Methodist Church on Cherry Street. Later, the eighth grade was moved into the old Commerce Grammar School cafeteria building after the large lunch room or cafeteria was partitioned.] *—Source ___ JHF*

This temporary Commerce Junior High School situation lasted for 2 ½ years until August of 1974 when the new Commerce Middle School on the south side of Lakeview Drive was ready to be occupied by faculty and students. The administration, faculty, students and citizens of the city were most thankful for this new facility.

In 1965, the third and present Commerce Tiger Stadium was constructed on the southeast side of the CHS campus, and the recent 2010 football season completed the facility's 46th year as the Commerce Tiger football stadium. This stadium has become, over the years, one of the most dreaded places for an opponent to play a football game in north Georgia.

In 1969, construction began on the new Commerce Elementary School, and it was ready for use by faculty and students in the fall of 1970.

Shortly after the fire at the Commerce Junior High School in January of 1972, this Commerce Elementary School was set on fire by arsonists with four rooms being damaged before the fire was extinguished. However, this facility was later repaired and ready for use a few months later during that same year.

Many male Commerce school faculty personnel as well as citizens of Commerce guarded all of the city's school facilities at night for most of the remainder of 1972 in an attempt to prevent future fires and they were successful.

Additionally in 1970, the Commerce Public School building dating back to 1903 which had most recently also served as the Commerce Grammar School for the city was demolished after 67 years of service to the City of Commerce. Many citizens felt it was a tragedy to remove this building from use by the city as well as from our community.

[Mr. William Derrick "Bud" Hartley and later Mr. Otha Payne were janitors of this facility in the 1950's and 1960's. These men and others were most beloved by the faculty and students.]

---Source___ *JHF, DF*

In the mid-1970's, a Little League Baseball field was constructed on a portion of the old football field behind this Grammar School Building site in Commerce. Many youth enjoyed their baseball experiences on this field especially during the 1970's and 1980's.

In the fall of 2004, the new Commerce Middle School south of the city on Jefferson Road was completed and ready for use. This new school is a beautiful facility and a welcome addition to the community.

Also in 2004, the old Commerce Middle School on Lakeview Drive was now transformed into the Commerce Elementary School facility housing grades 3 and 4.

Additionally in 2004, the old Commerce Elementary School on Lakeview Drive which had been built in 1970 now was renamed the Commerce Primary School housing grades 1 and 2 along with the kindergarten.

The fourth and new Commerce High School building which had been under construction for 18 months along side the site of the 1957 school was opened for occupancy by CHS students and faculty on January 18, 2011 taking the place of the 1957 version of Commerce High School.

The first basketball game in the 2011 version of the new Commerce High School was held on January 7th versus Towns County. The people of Commerce and its students were ecstatic at the opportunity to see the new gym and to play in the new basketball complex.

The official ribbon cutting ceremony highlighting the opening of the new Commerce High School and tour of the facility for the citizens of Commerce took place on Sunday afternoon, February 6, 2011. What a beautiful and wonderful complex the citizens of Commerce have in this new school. Congratulations to the Commerce Board of Education along with the high school administration and faculty for a job well done.

“Wow!” was the word that came out of many mouths, as citizens were given a tour of the new complex by school officials, faculty and students. It is an awesome looking school inside and outside as well as being wonderfully furnished and equipped.

The 1957 Commerce High School building had served the citizens of Commerce well for a total of 53 ½ years in that capacity. This older site saw the graduation of many fine and very well-rounded students. Most of the remainder of the old facility will be demolished soon.

New tennis courts and additional parking are scheduled to be added in the old CHS building area. The east and southeast wings of the old CHS are to be preserved for use by the school as well as administrative use.

Commerce citizens are proud of their city and the grand history of our school buildings as well as the heritage that the school system has of quality education for the students of our community and for the fielding of competitive sports teams as well.

Because of the leadership of the administration and faculty of the Commerce Public School System, a large number of students from Commerce have gone on to be very successful and have represented our town well in their many endeavors of life for over 100 years.

Commerce is especially proud of the new Commerce High School that has just opened, and the community looks forward to continued excellence in education in our fair city.

Also, a new track and field complex is under construction on the south side of the present Commerce Middle School campus and is set for completion in 2011. This will be an added attraction for sporting events as well as being put to great use by the citizens of Commerce.

Congratulations to Commerce, Ga. and the Commerce public education system. You have much to be proud of through all of your efforts for over one hundred years.

---Source ___ *Jeff Prickett, 2/21/11*
Updated ___ 3/5/11, 3/12/11, 3/23/11

Old Commerce Gym, 1927

Basketball was played at the auditorium of the old Commerce Public School Building in the 1920's. This school later became Commerce Grammar School in 1936 following the construction of the new Commerce High School on Shankle Heights Road that same year.

[In 1927, a combination new auditorium/gym, and a rather small gym at that, was built on the northwest side of the school campus where students performed in various school functions and where basketball games were played as well.

Additional acreage to the original school lot was purchased by the City of Commerce from Mr. J.A. Seegar for the purpose of building this new multi-purpose auditorium/gym.] ^

^ -- Source ___ *The History of Harmony Grove-Commerce*, by Mr. Thomas (Tom) C. Hardman

[[Commerce had some good basketball teams in the 1930's and through the early 1940's which drew some rather large crowds. The gym was heated by a pot belly stove on one end of the building. On cold nights, many fans stood near the stove and viewed the games.

The ceiling of the gym was not very high, and therefore high shots from outside the foul lane area could not be attempted. The two-handed set shot was a favorite shot during this period of time and was more of a line drive type. Inside play in the lane was very much a part of the game during this era as well as playmaking skills and the art of running the plays themselves.

All the fans were seated on one side of the gymnasium. The players of both teams were seated on the opposite side of the facility. The timer and scorer sat at the middle of the court on the same side of the court as the players. Of course this is still done in today's games as well.

The scorer for the game flipped metal numbers above the name HOME and VISITOR on a portable scoreboard in order to keep the score of the game.

Back in the 1930's and early 1940's, many people of Commerce would purchase season tickets to all the CHS home basketball games, for attending the games was a "happening" in the community.

Roads were primarily dirt during this period of time, and money was also of limited supply in this Great Depression era. Therefore, local teams that played and local events that were performed a short distance from one's home were a great entertainment attraction for local sports enthusiasts.

Many Tiger supporters would gather around the pot belly stove in downtown Commerce at Leo Black's shoe repair shop across the railroad track from Commerce Drug Store to discuss the games that had recently been played and of upcoming contests as well. Numerous true stories, tall tales and great opinions were shared there.

Braselton, Dacula, Statham, Gillsville and Winder had some good teams during this period of time. Maysville, Martin Institute in Jefferson and Davis Academy also produced formidable basketball competition for the Commerce teams.

A favorite cheer of the Tiger cheerleaders during the 1930's and early 1940's was "Barney Google, Andy Gump, we've got Maysville up a stump." Of course, other team's names were also inserted into the cheer as well when Commerce would play that particular school.

The fans of Commerce back in these days would fill the little gym at the old Commerce Public School building site and cheer on such Tiger players as Walter and Luther Cushing, Hall and Clyde Bone and Wilton and Eddie Bo Benton.

Bobby and Herbert Nix, Columbus Wade, Erastus "Rat" Collins and Clarence "Tater" Page were also excellent Tiger basketball players in this era of round ball in the city of Commerce.

Additionally, Hewlett "Tick" Lord, Gipson Carlton, Charles "Fuzzy" Ingram, Horace Cronic and Jimmy Martin were also good basketball players for the Tigers during this early period of basketball in Commerce.

Regis Borders, who later died in WWII following an airplane crash in the Mediterranean Sea after the plane on which he was a crew member was shot down by a German fighter pilot, was also a talented Tiger basketball player as well as a very tough football player and track star.

He performed at a high level in the discus and shot put events for Commerce High School in the early 1940's. He was also a tenacious football and basketball player for the Tigers as well.

Borders, in his early high school days about the year 1938, was the State of Georgia Marble Champion. He was very expert in the sport of marble shooting and was the city of Commerce marble champion a number of times as a youngster.

Who could ever forget the loud, booming voice of Dozier Rhodes at Commerce Tiger basketball games during the 1930's and early 1940's, as he pointed out the mistakes of the referees in a very humorous manner? This usually brought a great deal of laughter from fans and especially the very supportive Commerce crowd.

Because of gas being rationed during World War II, Commerce High School dropped basketball in 1942. The reason that Coach Richard Nix is said to have discontinued the playing of basketball rather than football was because basketball was played twice a week and football only once a week.

Therefore, less gas would be needed for game travel by the Commerce team during the season and as a result the saving of money for the school.

With football becoming the primary sport in the city after basketball was discontinued in 1942-1945, some citizens of Commerce gave money as well as some of their gas ration coupons to the school to enable the team to travel to away football games during this war period of time.

The people of Commerce have always been great supporters of the Commerce Public School System as well as the athletic teams, and the community really showed its spirit during these tough days of war with their support of the youth of Commerce.]] ^

^ --Source ___ *Welton Cronic, 1997*

Other additional info provided by *Jeff Prickett, February-March/2011*

First Football Uniforms, 1940

[Coach Richard Nix was the person most responsible for starting a football team once more in Commerce in 1940, after Commerce had stopped playing the sport following the 1928 season due to the coming of The Great Depression era's hard economic times.

In 1940, Commerce had a fast pitch softball league during the summer months, and games were played on a part of the old Grammar School playground behind the school building and new auditorium/gym area. This provided players and fans some needed local entertainment.

Back in the 1910's and 1920's and 1940-46, this field had also been used as the Commerce High School football field and was a distance of only 80 yards. The field was sometimes known as Hardman Field.

During a softball game in August of 1940, Mr. Smith, the FFA teacher at Commerce High School, drove up to the Commerce Grammar School dressing room which was located in the basement at the northwest section of the school.

Mr. Smith had a trailer attached to the rear of his car. He had brought back from Atlanta some old or used football uniforms from Georgia Tech. These “new jerseys” for the Commerce lads were of a mustard or yellowish brown color.

A lot of fans left the softball game to watch Coach Richard Nix and Mr. Smith unload the trailer and take the uniforms into the dressing room for storage.

At first, there was only one pair of shoulder pads when the first football practice started in September of 1940. During the first couple of weeks of practice that season, tailback Clarence “Tater” Page was the only player wearing shoulder pads, until used ones could later be collected for the rest of the team.] ^

^ ---Source ___ *Welton Cronic, 1997*

That first season for Commerce in 1940 ended with a record of (1-6-0) with the only victory coming at home versus Royston by a (33-0) score.

Coach Richard Nix coached the Tigers all through World War II. His football coaching tenure at Commerce covered a total period of time through six seasons (1940-45).

He ended with a six year football career coaching record of (25-30-2), and he had a (1-1-0) record in two playoff games. The first playoff game in 1943 was a victory over Elberton, and in the 1944 season, Commerce lost its second playoff game of the decade to Gainesville.

Coach Richard Nix was a dedicated and hard-nosed coach that got the best out of his players, as the young Commerce lads especially in those first three seasons had to learn this new game that had not been played in Commerce since 1928. Coach Nix had also served as the Tiger basketball coach for a number of years in the 1930’s and into the early 1940’s. He taught math and coached at Commerce High School from 1934-1946.

After three years of being tutored in the finer points of the game of football from 1940-1942, Commerce, under Coach Nix’s leadership, fielded two fine teams in 1943 and 1944 that both ended their respective seasons with a (9-2-0) record en route to one playoff game at the end of each of the two campaigns.

Following the death of Coach Richard Nix due to cancer in 1959, Commerce dedicated its first electronic scoreboard to the former coach. This scoreboard dedication event occurred on October 23, 1959 in a game versus Monroe Area High School. Commerce lost this homecoming contest by a score of (14-7).

This scoreboard was placed at the east end zone of Tiger Stadium which was located behind the Commerce High School building that was situated on Shankle Heights Road.

In 1965, this scoreboard was moved to the new and present Tiger Stadium and was placed on the side of the concession stand at the north end zone area of the stadium. This Tiger

scoreboard was used for a total of 25 years through the 1984 football season and was later replaced in 1985 by a Coca-Cola scoreboard at the south end zone area of the stadium.

In the early days during the modern era of Tiger football, Hardman Jones was the public address announcer for the Commerce football team from 1940 to about 1966. He was a businessman in Commerce.

[From 1940-46, Mr. Jones announced these early football contests for the Tigers from the second floor of the Commerce Grammar School. A window at the back of the school, which faced the football field, was opened and the game announcing was done from that position as he looked out over this midfield position.

During the 1940's before the Commerce football games began, not only was The National Anthem or *The Star-Spangled Banner* of the United States played from a recording over the loud speaker system, but also recordings of *Grand Old Flag* and *God Bless America* were also broadcast over the speaker system to the football fans that had gathered around the field.

It was indeed a patriotic setting for the football battle that was about to begin.

The first game that Commerce played in the modern era of Tiger football was at Washington, Ga. where Commerce lost to Washington (53-0). This game was played on Oct. 11, 1940.

The first game that Commerce played at home during this inaugural season in 1940 was against Cornelia. Commerce lost this contest by a score of (20-6). This game was played on Nov. 1, 1940. The Tigers ended the school's kickoff football season with a record of (1-6-0).

The first touchdown scored in the modern era of Tiger football occurred on Oct. 25, 1940, when tailback Clarence "Tater" Page threw a touchdown strike to end Herbert Nix in a game that saw Commerce lose by a score of (37-19) to Eastanollee in Stephens County.] ^

^ Source __ *Welton Cronin, 1997*

[[In 1943, poles with lights attached were placed around Hardman Field, and the first night football game played in Commerce occurred on Sept. 24, 1943 in a game that saw Commerce defeat the Cornelia Yellow Jackets by a score of (19-7).

The only playoff game ever hosted by Commerce on Hardman Field was on Dec. 3, 1943 when the Tigers defeated Elberton by a (32-12) score.

The final game played at Hardman Field was on Thursday morning (Thanksgiving) Nov. 22, 1945 when the Tigers defeated Cornelia by a score of (20-0).

The Tiger record at Hardman Field in the 1940's (1940-45) under Coach Richard Nix was (14-11-0).]]

--Source __ *Jeff Prickett, February, 2011*

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