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## Franconia Elementary School celebrates 75th anniversary

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By Bob Keeler

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FRANCONIA >> There's a reason they called it the Franconia Consolidated School when it opened in December of 1941.

Nine one-room schools were combined into what's since become known as Franconia Elementary School.

Stanley Moyer, who now lives at Souderton Mennonite Homes, was a sixth-grader when the school opened. Before that, he went to the one-room Detweiler School on Schoolhouse Road, where students went to a neighboring farm and carried buckets of water back to the school to use during the day.

At the consolidated school, they didn't have to do that. Another difference was that the new school had a cafeteria, located in the basement.

And it was made of brick, which at the time was a big deal, Principal Laura Heineck said.

"They said it was set up on the hill so everybody in town could see this prestigious brick building," Heineck said.

Franconia resident Curtis Landes, another sixth-grader in 1941, went to the one-room Earlington School on Morwood Road before the consolidated school opened.

The building that was the Earlington School is still standing, he said. The Detweiler building was torn down when the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike was built, Moyer said.

Landes said his neighbor, whose last name was Freed, was the first janitor at the then-new school.

"I helped mow the lawn sometimes," Landes said. "They didn't have as much grass then. They didn't have a riding mower, either."

Moyer remembers helping the janitor, too, but with a different job.

"At recess time, I had to put coal on the fire," he said.

That wasn't all the time, though. It was mainly when the janitor was busy plucking geese at Thanksgiving, he said.

Moyer and Landes were two of the people who came back to the school for a 75th anniversary celebration and open

house Thursday, Oct. 6.

Souderton Area School Board member Janet Flisak was another of those on hand.

"This is really interesting. It's really nice to see the pictures," she said as she looked through displays showing the school in different time periods.

In 1987, the school held a Jamie Moyer Day, on which the then-Chicago Cubs pitcher returned to his elementary school.

A 1997 time capsule included an America Online disk and notes in the time capsule explained that the school had a new Internet page, new Macintosh personal computer and the students liked to play the Carmen Sandiego CD game on the computer. There was also a Hanson music CD.

Joan Shellenberger, Franconia Elementary's reading specialist, has been a Souderton Area School District employee for 19 years, but her connections to the school go back to her own school days.

Mildred Hallman, who was the school's first principal, was Shellenberger's principal there until fifth grade. When Hallman retired in 1966, Mark Garis, who later was district superintendent, became principal. Next came Barbara Scott, who was principal from 1990 to 1995.

"She was principal while my children attended Franconia," Shellenberger said.

Bradley Clemens, who later was the district's assistant superintendent, was Franconia's principal from 1995 to 2000 and the person who hired her as a Souderton Area teacher, Shellenberger said.

Earlier in the day Oct. 6, there was a 75th anniversary celebration with the current students and she was one of the speakers, Shellenberger said.

"I told the children that when I came here to school, we didn't have Google," Shellenberger said. "We had encyclopedias."

When she was a student at the school in the 1960s, students were not allowed to wear jeans or shorts to school, she said.

"The girls all had to wear dresses," Shellenberger said.

She also remembered having assemblies in which all the students watched one television.

"We'd all sit here in the auditorium and watch space launches," Shellenberger said.

Another of the speakers remembered air raid drills at the school, she said.

A family with three generations who had attended Franconia Elementary spoke in the session with the students, Heineck said.

"It's pretty special that families that went here stay here," she said. "It shows Souderton's a special place."

"It's a fabulous building," Superintendent Frank Gallagher said of the school. "Great culture here."

As former faculty members hugged, updated each other on their families and shared memories, Clemens said it was

good to get back together and see each other.

His memories of being Franconia's principal include a major addition and construction work, he said.

Students pulling wagons helped move things into the new addition, he said.

"We actually moved everything from the old side to the new side," Clemens said.

That allowed the contractor to do renovations to the older portion before the entire school could be used.

"We had several years of dust and I remember many fire alarms went off for dust," he said.

It all worked out, though, he said.

"It's a great building," Clemens said. "It's a great school."

During the open house, attendees got to see what's happening in the schools today, along with reading historical materials, such as excerpts written for "The Franconia Flash" yearbook in the 1940s. One of those reported that the third grade had 40 class members and that Ronald Moyer won a cake for selling the most chocolate cakes in a cake and doughnut sale.

Videos in the classrooms also outlined the school's history.

"Usually, the open house is in the spring," third-grade teacher Brenda Krupp said. "We decided to do it now with the 75th anniversary."

In her classroom, the 75th anniversary theme carried over into open house activities such as trying to find out which of a group of items weighed 75 grams, an invitation to be part of a collection of 75 acts of kindness and 75 birthday cards made by students for the 75th anniversary.

"Inside they wrote what Franconia used to be like, what it's like now and what they think it'll be like in the future," Krupp said.

Gail Ryan, who was principal at the school from 2008 until she retired this year, said the Franconia school is unique.

"It's got incredible family support, wonderful families," Ryan said.

"It's a generous community," she said, noting last year's Jump Rope for Heart event at the school raised about \$10,000.

"It's got a great group of kids," Ryan said.

The best years of her 27 years as a school district employee were the ones at Franconia Elementary, she said.

"It put me in a place where I could work with teachers and children and families," Ryan said. "From my vantage point, being a principal's the best job ever."

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