

A Trilogy:

The unknown story of Harbor High School

Part One: The first 50 years

To some of you this will sound like a “sour grapes story.” To others of you, it will be looked upon as something that should have been said long ago. However you view this story, the demise of Harbor High School really is a sad story and one that has been bandied about for decades. Many harborites knew it way back when and felt it. Some uptowners knew it especially well because they were involved with the planners of the demise seemingly forever. Who they were is an unknown, but so many in the harbor area felt their school was being targeted for closure long, long ago.

Somehow the spirit of competition between the uptowners and the harborites didn't set well with some people. Odd as it may seem however, students at both schools delighted in that competition. The uptown kids and harbor kids always got along really well. During my junior and senior years at HHS, I dated an uptown (AHS) girl regularly. And when I wasn't looking she dated a harbor guy on other days. I can remember calling her on a warm summer day in 1955 to go to a movie. Her dad answered the telephone telling me she was getting married that night to the other guy. I guess I was relieved. Some years later Donna died. I've never found out how and why.

When it was first opened in 1911, Harbor High School was the pride of the Harbor community. It was also the first new building designed of a new architectural style with an iron framework to be built in the area. It's designer had built many others like it, all of which had been well received. He was an architectural celebrity of sorts. Immigrants from abroad who came from Ireland, Finland, Sweden and Italy inhabited the harbor neighborhood. Others were from England and Wales and Scotland and many came from Lebanon. The area was a true representation of the great American “melting pot.” During the late summer months harbor mothers of every representative nationality volunteered for many years at HHS and the other school buildings, washing walls, floors, windows and desks. They enjoyed their labors and they proved their faithfulness to the harbor district over and over again.

Brand new, Harbor High School was designed to reflect the ideals of the world's best-known philosophers, authors, poets, engineers and explorers and inventors. The school's teachers arrived to instruct their new charges with excitement and daring. Athletes would become famous overnight and some would go on to represent us on the U.S Olympic team and young musicians who learned from older and wiser musicians at the school would go on to become great teachers themselves. The harbor schools would never be without classical music, Sousa marches, an orchestra and band of high stature and choral groups who sang to our world with immense pleasure. Harbor grads became world travelers when they took their instruments with them and delighted the people of Finland in 1927 when they performed in the famous Humina Band under the direction of George Wahlstrom. Laura Topky, the daughter of Oliver C. Topky accompanied the band as a featured harpist.

The administration believed firmly in keeping its taxpayers informed and in so doing, rarely had to beg for money. The weekly “Mariner,” an award-winning school newspaper printed in the HHS print shop by students on a hand-fed Gordon letterpress cranking out a minimum of 75 papers a minute. It was circulated throughout the harbor area and everyone always knew what was going on at the schools. Further, a more learned and experienced school principal supervised the other principals and teachers and it was she who called upon the homes and parents of every student in the Harbor Special School District. In those days there was no such thing as a student who couldn't learn and succeed both in school and in life. These were the “good old days.” the likes of which we will never see again.

Throughout the first forty years of Harbor High history, Dr. William Ervin Wenner led the harbor district. He served the community for all of those 40 years and was supported by school board president, Charles Askew who, along with most members, remained all that time. Before “double-dipping” became a nasty idea in the political world, Wenner served in both the House and Senate of the State of Ohio while serving as Harbor superintendent. While he was away in Columbus, his staff of principals, teachers and dedicated parents kept the Harbor Special Schools running like a Swiss watch. He was loved and admired by people around town and around the state.

After Dr. Wenner’s death in 1949, the Harbor schools began to change. Ralph Lanham became its superintendent. Although a huge new modern gymnasium was built, again without begging for the money from the local residents, big changes were on the horizon. World War II had concluded and most of the nearly 400 men and women from HHS who had gone off to war, returned to forge new careers and lives for themselves. The Second World War spawned new ideas in education, imagination, inventiveness and creativity. The coal and ore docks down along the waterfront were no longer as busy as they had been during the war and the need for bigger and more expansive funding appeared coming down the road. Nevertheless, graduates of Harbor High School entered colleges and universities without question or testing simply because they had graduated from Ashtabula’s Harbor High School.

During those first 50 years, Harbor High School would graduate dozens of young men and women who would go out into the world and make a major contribution to a yet youthful nation. They would become inventors of great stature, corporate executives and board chairmen, preachers and savers of souls, one or two became world renown theologians, a few became famous artists, attorneys, radio personalities, athletes, nurses, teachers, physicians and more. A survivor of the sinking of the Titanic would be educated here and her husband and family would serve the school their entire lives. **You will read about them in Part 2 of this trilogy.**

Ever since the original consolidation of the Harbor Special School District into the Ashtabula Area City Schools back in the early 1960s, it had been the intention of the Ashtabula City Area Board of Education to bring the two ends of town together through the two high schools. Little by little over the past five decades, the Ashtabula Board of Education and its many superintendents who came and left through the system’s revolving doors along with a handful of uptown business people, there had been a plan of some kind to meld the schools into one but it was never realized. The late David P. DeLuca once commented on how when he first entered the city manager’s office as the city’s elected leader, he was approached by certain business people with instructions to him on how he was to manage the city according to their personal interests. He told me those business owners were the very same people who were guiding the eventual demise of the Harbor area. Needless to say DeLuca threw them out onto the street. What he said back then never came to fruition.

After that 1960s consolidation, people at both ends of the town grew suspicious of the school board. They were shocked when the Victorian lampposts that once lined Lake Avenue in front of Harbor High School disappeared. Some ended up in private yards although harborites never knew how that took place. The HHS print shop was moved uptown. Harbor students were told they could no longer sing the “Harbor Hymn,” although many did until it was finally brought back. After the Jackson Elementary building was razed, the big bell in the old school tower went to some unknown location and was never seen again. Soon, the names of America’s greatest authors, scientists, mathematicians, historians and the like that had been painted in gold leaf on the windows of classroom doors, were scraped away. The brass railings in the auditorium disappeared. The pristine lawns at the school were trampled and the old idea that kids should have respect for property, disappeared from daily learning. Before long, asphalt pathways were cut into the green grass and no one said a word about the unsightliness of the campus. The whole scene promoted ugliness. A few parents believed it was part of the plan though they could not prove it. Students were permitted to use the famous “F” word in school. Many kids were required to know that word on entering HHS. And the teachers and administrators looked the other way or listened with a deaf ear.

And so it went. One day the statues representing “Night” and “Day” that graced the auditorium and sat silently and untouched for generations in little alcoves of the auditorium disappeared. Some really stupid parent had complained the statues were too “pornographic” for teenage eyes. But it was those teenage eyes who already knew more about sex and pornography than did their parents. So where are those “gifts” to HHS from previous graduating classes? Who knows? Perhaps they went to the landfill. Many other gifts that decorated the halls have also gone missing. Does anyone know where those plaster reliefs disappeared to that represented the “Spirit of 1776?” In a later year the AACS painted over them with white house paint completely obliterating the designation of them as a class gift.

After HHS became a junior high school for a time it was finally closed by Dr. William Licate as one of his final acts of superintendency. Shortly thereafter the plastered walls were removed and the asbestos in them taken away to a safe landfill. Huge sections of the old school were decimated. Even the roof in the gymnasium, high above the floor where it would never affect anyone, was removed. That assured the members of the school board that no one would want the building once the floor was ruined and wasted.

The board of education said it made numerous attempts to sell the historic old school building, but people in the harbor and in particular the historic district of the harbor know only too well that no real effort was made to sell the building. They couldn’t bring themselves to dicker with the one interested party who, had they given him time to make a genuine presentation, might have saved and preserved the gorgeous old building and given it new life in a community that now begs desperately for new life.

And so, now that the wrecking ball is on its way, the death of the historic harbor cannot be far behind. Whether you believe it or not there are those who still see Main Avenue as the saving grace of the city.

The trilogy continues: **The unknown story of Harbor High School** **Part Two: World-renowned graduates**

Every school in America has its share of graduates who’ve made a difference in the world. Ashtabula High School has its famous people. So do all the others around us. The honored alumni lists are long. At Harbor High School, the list is equally long and quite impressive.

The harbor’s claim to fame was given birth by its longtime superintendent. Dr. Wenner was so highly regarded many people nearly made him into a god. But Wenner was highly educated. Not only was he our most revered superintendent, but he was our inspiration as well. It was he who urged students to work hard enough to achieve their highest goals. It was he who regularly visited classrooms and gave candid lectures on life, spelling, grammar, the sciences, religion, godliness; it was he who originated the Thanksgiving Day football games between the Harbor Mariners and the Ashtabula Panthers. One year the game was held uptown and the next year down in the harbor. And it was he who kept the time during the games, walking the sidelines and peppering the squads.

In addition to his having served in the State House and Senate, Wenner was a regular orator on the Redpath Lyceum, traveling around the country giving lectures on everything from soup to nuts and anything related to modern education. People attended in droves for he was so inspirational and encouraging. He was also the force behind so many young men and women who on leaving HHS, went into the world to make contributions to our nation. He knew and understood the true meaning of time, talents and treasures.

Down at Wenner Field on West 10th Street, the chain link fence around that athletic field was his idea. It originally was fenced-in with a wooden fence. When the Board of Education sought to purchase and install

the chair link, Wenner went to the supplier and asked how much could be saved if he led the students to take down the old fence. By doing so, Wenner got that new fence for about 25% less. The students got the day off school and they got to haul the old wood home for use in heating their houses. One wouldn't even begin to think like that today.

One of Harbor High School's more creative graduates was Carl Kantola. He lived with his family on West 14th Street in what is now the second house from Lake Avenue on the North side of the street. Even before graduating, Kantola knew what he was going to do in life. While still a senior at Harbor High, Kantola was hired by the New York Central Railway Company on March 18, 1920. Following graduation in June of that year, the railroad sent him to school. He first went to Pratt Institute taking courses in drafting and engineering. He followed Pratt with two years more of engineering and drafting



KARL KANTOLA, HHS-1920. Engineer, designer, inventor.

through ICS, finishing in 1923. From there he went on to complete work in steam locomotion and mechanical and electrical design. He then enrolled at the General Motors Electromotive Division preparing for diesel-electric locomotion. By February 5, 1926, he became a fulltime design engineer for the New York Central Railway

Co. working in New York City.

In 1934, Kantola designed the world's very first streamlined steam locomotive (pictured here). That engine sped through Ashtabula twice each day giving power to the famed 20th Century Limited. During his 47-year career, he designed a second streamlined locomotive for the Rexall Drug Company in 1936; designed an improved high speed water scoop for steam engines to take on water while speeding along at 80 mph; ten U.S. Patents were issued to him for this innovation. He followed this invention by converting a gasoline-driven rail car to a diesel-driven inspection car that checked clearances in tunnels and beneath bridges; then designed a rail defect car that searched for weak and bad spots in steel railroad rails. Kantola designed a modernization process for diesel-electric locomotives; he further designed an electrical distribution system for rail yards, electric snow and ice melters for use on switches, switchgear, transformer stations and improved electrical interior lighting on railcars. He also designed a method of assuring railways that their tracks were exactly 4 ft. 8½ inches apart.



STREAMLINED STEAM LOCOMOTIVE designed by Harbor grad Kantola in 1934

Kantola retired in 1967, and died on April 23, 1992. He has yet to be included in the Harbor High School Alumni Hall of Fame.

Other Harbor High School alums who gave in many huge ways to the world we live in include Raymond J. Koski, a consummate artist and licensed architect; he painted his way through World War II rendering portraits of Army Generals and doing illustrations for the USO Magazine; Kaarlo Mackey who was a lifelong musician and former Ashtabula Town Choir Director; he used his music on behalf of our troops as an Army band member. Wayne Mack who on a lark applied for a job at a Cleveland Radio station and became the dean of Cleveland Radio Broadcasters working until his death in his early 90s. Troops and the folks at home heard his music around the world, keeping up their spirits and invigorating them while they worked for peace on the home front. He discovered such personalities at Jack Paar, one of the early hosts of the Tonight Show and more locally, Fred Griffith of Channel 3 TV. He knew the “greats” of his day including Harry James, Glen Miller and Frank Sinatra among many. Oliver “Felix” Kaura, Howard O. Pardee, Edwin Karhu, Victor Karhu, Albert “Jack” Hjerpe all became band and orchestra conductors and teachers with long satisfying careers. Rev. Dr. Taitio Kantonen became a theology professor at Hamma Divinity School and an author of theological works. He assisted the immigrant church in becoming an American church. Dr. Paul Mackey became a lifelong educator through the Dale Carnegie Institute and earned his degrees on that organization’s behalf. Kaarlo Lindell graduated from the Michigan College of Mines (now Michigan Tech) and from there spent his life with Johns-Manville Company. He rose to sit as chairman of the board at Johns-Manville of Canada and eventually chairman and chief executive officer of Johns-Manville USA in New York City. He opened various underground mines around the world.

Michael Kaihlanen became a physician, team doctor and an owner of the San Antonio Spurs basketball team of the NBA. Sally Sarrell became a Playboy Centerfold. Eva Von Felitz graduated with the class of 1955 and became known as Eva Lynd. She went to work for IFTN reporting Hollywood news for that organization. She married Warren Munson of Pennsylvania who has a resume of Broadway and Hollywood/TV as long as both of your arms. Check him out on www.imdb.com. Victor Paananen graduated from Harvard University and took advanced degrees at the University of Wisconsin. He began his teaching career at Michigan State University rising to become head of the English department. James K. Huhta spent his life at Middle Tennessee State University. He served America as an advisor to several U.S. presidents as a member of the Board for Historical Preservation. Former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore and Dr. Huhta are close personal friends. William Asuma spent his life with the federal government working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He returns to Ashtabula each spring where he votes on each of our elections, and winters in Hawaii.

Three hundred and thirty young men and three women, all of whom attended and/or graduated from Harbor High School served in World War Two. Some of them left HHS in their senior year enlisting in the armed services to join the fight for world peace. Among the three women was Laura Topky, the daughter of Oliver C. Topky of Topky Hardware fame. Laura was a very proficient performer on the harp and had traveled to Europe and Finland in 1927 with Ashtabula Harbor’s famous Humina Finnish Band and was the only female in the organization, directed by Harbor music director, George Wahlstrom. She was also a member of the Harbor High School orchestra. In service to her country, Laura Topky was assigned to the 39th WAAC Post Headquarters at Camp Upton, New York.

Of the 330 men, 27 were killed in action during World War II. Three paid the full price in the Korean Conflict and two gave up theirs in the Viet Nam war. The 306 who went off to war after Dec. 7, 1941 but who were lucky enough to return to our American soils have never been recognized for their services and should be even at this late date. Thus it is our intention to give them their honored due with the Harbor Mariner Memorial Park on the land of Harbor High School. Their names will be imprinted on those sandstone pilasters that are taken down from the building when it is razed and dogwood trees will be planted in behalf of the vets around the memorials.

For those who left the Harbor, went off to colleges and universities and then into the American land to give of themselves, benches, a variety of oaks, maples and birches, along with the Victorian-styled lampposts and lamps similar to those that once lined Lake Avenue in front of the venerable old school will further decorate the park. Living family members who wish to honor those whose lives reflect upon the community and gave us much of which to be proud will purchase them.

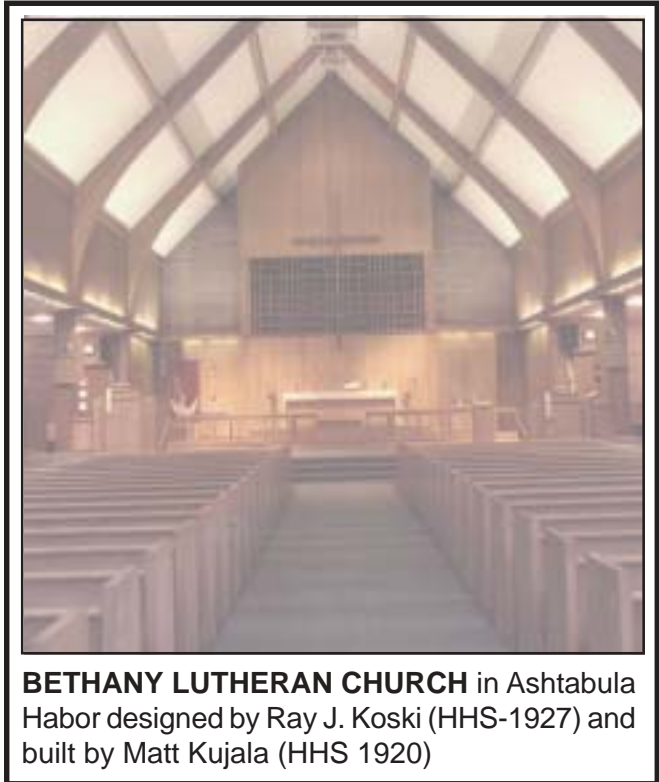
It is also hoped that the concrete pad beneath the Fawcett Gymnasium floor can be preserved and used in winter as an ice skating rink. In time, a mechanical ice-making system will be installed and paid for by donations from alumni and friends.

As a community we owe much to our forebears, especially to those who have proven records of success in life and in particular to those who gave the last full measure to preserve and promote eternal freedoms around the world.

The list of graduates who have succeeded and done well in our world continues to grow with each passing year. There are many who go unrecognized and many more who never get the kindness of a simple salute because as a community we seem to have forgotten them.

Were a park, however large or better yet somewhat smaller to come along, in which we might honor all those who honored us by their contributions to our American society, it should be nowhere else but at the Harbor and surely on the campus of Harbor High School.

We owe it to them – to all of them – and on the land where they were educated and from which they were sent into the world.



BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH in Ashtabula Harbor designed by Ray J. Koski (HHS-1927) and built by Matt Kujala (HHS 1920)

PART THREE

Honorees

(Please note: If you have other names to add here, please send an email.)

PREACHERS AND THEOLOGIANs

Rev. Dr. R.A. Kantonen, Seminary Professor and author.

Rev. William Luoma

Rev. Thomas V. Asuma

Rev. William Howard Stegal

Rev. Timothy Hume Behrendt

Rev. Terry Mohr

Rev. Jim Miller

Rev. Jerry Davis

Rev. Donald Heino

Rev. Martin Lundi (mothr was a Titanic survivor)

Susan Hartman Simmons, HHS 1955

Judith Lamb Robertson, HHS 1955

MUSICIANS & MUSIC TEACHERS

Dr. George Wahstrom

Howard Orlando Pardee, HHS 1930

William A. Altonen, HHS 1927

Kaarlo Mackey,, HHS 1927

Wayne Mack (Mackey), HHS 1927

Oliver Kaura

Albert Hjerpe

ENGINEERS & INVENTORS

Carl Kantola , HHS 1920

Matt Kujala, HHS 1920

Kenneth Swanson, HHS 1955

David Kuivinen, HHS 1954

Ralph P. Kuivinen

Kaarlo Lindell

MILITARY

At least 333 but more like 400 in WWII

WWI (needs researched)

Korean War (“ ”)

Viet Nam (“ ”)

ARTISTS & ARCHITECTS

Ray J. Koski, HHS 1927

Betty Louise Conklin White, HHS 1955

Beverly Uitto Bachmaier, HHS 1956

UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS & TEACHERS

Dr. James K. Huhta, HHS 1955

Dr. Victor Paananen, HHS 1956

Dr. Jack Kangas, HHS 1956

Irene Jordan Dardashti, HHS

PHYSICIANS & NURSES

Dr. Michael Kaihlanen, HHS 1955

Dr. Kenneth Brace, HHS

Dr. James Lambros, HHS

13 March 2009

Ashtabula City Area Board of Education
401 West 44th Street
Ashtabula, Ohio 44004

Dear Board Members,

As you move toward a long overdue overhaul of our city's schools you are no doubt filled with numerous decisions. From reading the newspapers I have attempted to keep up with those choices you've had to make and can appreciate the difficulty you have had to deal with in the closing and razing of school buildings. In many ways, what you must do is very much akin to the decisions and choices made recently in Cleveland with the announced closing of churches. In the process hearts are broken and a lifetime of memories disappear with impediments, distress and perplexity.

In 2011 the Harbor High School building would turn 100 years old and from the outside, even with the plywood over the windows and doors, still looks gallant and bold. But as a college and university graduate married to a college and university graduate with children who are college graduates I understand the necessity of moving forward with changes in the educational process of our children and young people

Looking ahead to the future and with this letter and its accompaniments I am requesting along with the names of Harbor High graduates listed below, our opportunity to use the land on which Harbor High will soon depart as a memorial park for Harbor graduates who succeeded in the world and or who went off to war to secure the freedoms we enjoy today in America. The list of honored Harbor High School graduates is very long and those who not only gave of themselves in war but who also gave of themselves to our America and its development is also lengthy. As graduates of Harbor High School we would like for the Ashtabula City Area Board of Education to give us that land for our Harbor High School Mariner Memorial Park use, once the old school has been demolished and the site leveled and reseeded.

While the HHS site belongs to the residents of the harbor neighborhood and to them it should be given, I am also aware of the Ashtabula City Port Authority's interest in the parcel. That being the case I took the liberty of discussing our interest with Port Authority Chairman, Ronald Kister, who told me the Port Authority, would be willing to work with us in the establishment of the Mariner Memorial Park since there are no plans established for the site. But the Ashtabula Area City Schools Board of Education would have to direct Mr. Kister and the Port Authority to take our group on, as it's only client for the land. Or, the Board of Education could divide the site into two sections, gifting the north section to the Harbor alumni and the south section to the Port Authority. The division of the site would come at the east-west sidewalk at the north end of the Sidley (band room, library, shop) building adjoining the southern side of the high school building.

If the Board of Education is amenable to this idea, the members of the alumni listed below will submit a plan for the Mariner Memorial Park by April 1, 2009, with our requirements for items from the old school building, to the Board.

Sincerely

Charles A. Altonen
Lynnor Karhu Whitney
Don Peters
Martin Lindenmeyer
Jon A. Altonen
James Laird & Susan Carle Laird and an ever
growing list of additional alumni and friends.