

CHAPTER TWO

## Laurel's Adolescence



**M**artha (Thompson) Scohy crouched in the dirt of Laurel School's playground, carefully piling dust into neat piles around her feet. Soon, she imagined, she would be surrounded by a city of tiny hills, a field of castles she would build under the warmth of the September sun. But suddenly, her daydreams were interrupted by the bright clanging of a handbell that echoed across the yard. Martha looked up from her play to see the janitor, dressed in his heavy boots and worn clothes, standing in the yard, swinging a gleaming bell back and forth, calling them in from recess. Obediently, she stood and dashed towards the front of her school with a crowd of other children, jostling and pushing as they formed an unruly line outside the front steps of the building. Together with her classmates, Scohy's feet tramped up the cement steps as they marched into the school. The clamorous sound of the handbell was abruptly replaced with the scratching music of a Victrola record player, which drifted out across the main landing as the children walked into class. The year was 1928, the first of two in which Scohy would attend Laurel. Yet even years later, she remembered the bell and the record player of her school days, ringing through her memory.

After the busy flurry of its construction, Laurel became the site of many other vivid memories for children such as Scohy. Even in its early days, the school already showed the glowing tendencies

that endeared it to generations of students, including its acceptance and nurturing attitude to all children who walked through its doors, no matter who they were or where they came from. The school held May Day Celebrations and selected children to dance around the maypole every year, helped them build their own birdhouses, and put on Arbor Day programs, quietly guiding children through their education. There were only two specifically documented closures throughout Laurel's first 20 years, one of which occurred when two children came down with contagious symptoms in 1907 and the school had to be fumigated. These closures and sanitizing measures are ones with which we are now as familiar as those who experienced them in the past; as Fort Collins and Laurel endured multiple outbreaks throughout the town's history similar to the novel coronavirus pandemic that began sweeping across the globe in 2019 and 2020. Among these were the typhoid outbreak in 1900,



Maypole dance, Mrs. Ray's afternoon kindergarten class, undated.

as well as the 1918 influenza pandemic, which young children were particularly susceptible to. Indeed, throughout the fall of 1918 into the spring of 1919, Fort Collins' businesses, citizens and schools weathered repeated bouts of social distancing until the Spanish influenza had largely run its course.

But through thick and thin, the Laurel Street School remained a constant fixture in Fort Collins as the town continued to expand, the municipal boundaries eventually enveloping the school grounds. It was a fulfillment of the school board's initial prediction that the town would grow to meet Laurel's location, and they couldn't have been more correct. In the decade of Laurel School's birth, the population of Fort Collins grew from 3,153 people in 1907 to 8,210 in 1910, all of whom shepherded their children through Laurel, Remington, Franklin and LaPorte Ave. schools. Laurel's founding father, Fuller, was kept busy with the growth spurt too, as he constructed new homes and buildings throughout Fort Collins. His pedantic, practical architectural style easily marked the town, and can still be seen in some buildings scattered around Fort Collins to this day. In addition, the land-grant college that Fuller had attended grew as well, building Colorado Field, the outdoor football stadium which was later renamed to Hughes Field in 1912, and painting the distinctive 'A' on one of the western foothills in 1923. Then, on July 15, 1911, the Union Pacific Railroad brought its first train to Fort Collins, which only added to the town's growth.

But along with the astounding population growth, Laurel also weathered many ecological catastrophes in its early years. These included a drought and a plague of grasshoppers in 1910, as well as the 'Blizzard of 1913,' which saw all schools closed due to the smowy, cold wave. Then Fort Collins celebrated its 50th birthday in 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I in Europe. As the Great



July 15, 1911, opening of Union Pacific service between Denver and Fort Collins.

War finally gasped to its conclusion in 1918 and American soldiers returned home victorious, Spanish Influenza struck Fort Collins a brutal blow, causing many public buildings, including Laurel, to close for quarantine purposes. But after this bout of misfortune, Fort Collins, too, benefitted from the wave of post-war prosperity, up until the Great Depression laid its hand across the United States during the 1930s. During this period, the ‘Dust Bowl’ enveloped Fort Collins and parts of the agricultural Great Plains, bringing a return of the grasshoppers from 20 years earlier to plague the city again. But it wasn’t all bad news for the beleaguered town, and especially for Laurel as another institution was added to Fort Collins’ ranks. Lincoln School opened in 1919 to welcome the increasing number of children in Fort Collins. This new institution was renamed Harris in 1938, after long-time teacher and principal Margaret “Mame” Harris. The history of Harris was to deeply intertwine with Laurel’s own, so its opening is of great significance.

Not long after America struggled back to its feet after the Great Depression, global warfare swallowed Europe once again. This time, America engaged in the conflict more quickly than in 1917, and the repercussions of World War II had a greater impact in Fort Collins as well as the nation. Everyone became involved in the war effort; even the youngest Americans at schools collected scrap metal, held paper collection drives, and bought and sold war bonds. For Laurel students at the time, this meant going across the street to the candy store during their lunches, where they could buy wax lips and teeth, bottles of sweet syrup candy, bubble gum, jaw breakers, fireballs, and stamps for war bonds—for only a dime each. For some students, such as Phillis (Hill) Stroh, the war had a more direct impact than candy and collection drives. Stroh’s first grade teacher, a fiery redhead by the name of Miss Sherman, left Laurel to join the Women’s Army Corps a year after she taught Stroh’s class. Yet as the war dragged on, Laurel’s children were not only exposed to the conflict through newspaper and war bond exchanges, but through events much closer to home. A prisoner of war camp was soon established not far from Fort Collins, and the German men interred there soon became active hands in the community who helped to construct more of the city’s buildings. In a way, this allowed Laurel’s students to see the ‘enemies’ America was fighting in a different light—as people, more similar than different to the students themselves.

Unfortunately, the two World Wars were hardly the last conflicts that Laurel and Fort Collins would weather. The Cold War began a mere two years after the armistice of 1945, and the Korean Conflict three years after that. Although the children of Laurel were undoubtedly aware of the tensions filling their country at home and abroad, their school lives marched on in the way that ordinary lives





1913 blizzard, looking north on College Ave.

always do, quietly and insistently, no matter the grand schemes and intrigues that rattled the nation. In fact, Laurel Elementary received an extra 3,200 square feet in 1958 for a ‘multiple-purpose room’ on the east side of the aging building to serve as a new gymnasium, cafeteria, and assembly hall. This was particularly helpful, as before that time, the school had held their assemblies on Laurel’s front steps.

One of Laurel’s own students, Laura (Marasco) Walton, who later returned to teach at the school, particularly remembered how the steps to Laurel’s front doors were a communal space. In addition to hosting all-school assemblies, they also served as a popular play yard. As such, the steps became a physical heirloom of the building and a site of many childhood traditions. For instance, Mrs. Walton and her mother, both of whom went to Laurel, shared a familiar pastime that was always held on the school’s front steps: jacks. In fact, so many children shared in the game that after years of tournaments on Laurel’s stoop, a divot formed on the most popular of

the stairs, which can still be seen today. Yet Mrs. Walton wasn’t the only one to recall the energy which surrounded Laurel, even outside of the classroom.

In 1955, Laurel’s recess was a bustling place that, as every child knows, is looked on with equal if not more importance than what is learned at desks and chalkboards. There, girls in brightly-colored dresses (as they were not allowed to wear pants in public, save for one weekend a year: College Days, now known as Homecoming Weekend) mingled with boys before games of kiss and tag, enjoying the temporary break from schoolwork. When later asked about her memories of Laurel, Karen (Skold) Tow immediately straightened, a bright, if distant grin lighting her face. “Recess always had lively games of jacks in warm weather and kickball,” she said fondly. “Girls played with Ginny dolls, [the] precursors to Barbies.” Out of doors, in the sunshine and fresh air, Laurel’s students were free to learn what a classroom couldn’t teach them, the kinds of experiences that stay with you for years afterwards. Joan Day, for instance, got the “first kiss of her life” on Laurel’s grounds, and Doug Hutchinson, a future mayor of Fort Collins, met the girl who would one day become his wife in one of Laurel’s kindergarten classes.

Claudia (Stevens) Rouge, meanwhile, got up to a bit more active mischief while at school. She remembered trying her first cigarettes in the bathrooms (not without getting caught at it) and sneaking broccoli into her milk carton so she could get more spaghetti during lunchtime. But of course, Laurel wasn’t just a place for fun and games. Tow leaned back in her seat as she reminisced, saying “In fifth grade we were the ‘senior class’ because sixth graders were in Junior High in 1955. That was the year we learned to write with pens—Schaeffer Fountain pens and ink. We also learned decimals and worked pretty darn hard at everything.”

As the town's children worked, Fort Collins continued to experience more post-war growth, in spite of the Great Western Sugar Company closing in 1953. Even the school system itself was undergoing multiple changes, beginning in the 1950s, as many smaller districts in Northern Colorado began to consolidate into what would become Poudre R-1 School District.

Soon after the 1950s, the Vietnam War brought with it a period of turmoil and activism from 1965-1975, a trend that did not go unnoticed by Laurel's young students. Diane (Moreng) Johnson still recalls how she "was in [her] sixth grade class when we received the information that President Kennedy was shot." But despite the issues of the day, Laurel's students did what all students do: come to school, learn, and have a bit of fun.

And Laurel's students weren't the only ones who came to work, learn, and play. Even though Ann Sterling only attended Laurel (known now as Laurel Elementary School) for one year in the mid-1960s, she still recalled how her principal, Bernie Long, was actively involved with the student body. He was never a menacing figurehead only to be seen when you were caught pulling someone's hair or smoking in the bathroom. Instead, Mr. Long was the type of man who made you feel as though he had been mentoring you since the day you walked through Laurel's doors, whether you were a teacher or a student. "He knew every student and teachers' strengths and weaknesses," Sterling said, sitting at one of the tables in Laurel's library one afternoon. It was during one of the quiet periods between reading groups, and even her soft-spoken voice seemed loud among all the books and tables. "I believe he was instrumental in everyone's success and sense of value and esteem."

It was this personal attention and sense of devotion that Ann remembered years after she left Laurel, the sense that school

was a place where everyone was not merely one student or teacher among a hundred, but a unique individual. Mr. Long embodied this care, which continued to be emblematic of Laurel Elementary over the years in every aspect of work and play. For instance, Sterling remembered how she and her classmates were able to take part in the Gateway program, which was located in a building across the yard next to the school. In that program, Laurel's students could spend their lunches volunteering with developmentally challenged students and their teachers, learning that no matter how different someone seems from yourself, they are always deserving of dignity and respect.



1947 kindergarten. Third row from bottom: from left, second student is Cathy McKellar, third student is Doug Hutchinson. They were destined to marry years later and become Mayor and Cathy Hutchinson of Fort Collins.