

10-12-84

Lifestyle

Vilas School plans week long celebration

An El Paso public school, named for a pioneer physician, will mark its 75th year with a homecoming celebration the week of Nov. 11.

It's Vilas School at 220 Lawton Dr., built in 1909, a two-story structure of stone and brick.

DR. WALTER N. VILAS was born at Red Creek, N.Y., in 1847. He enlisted with the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in 1863 and served until the close of the Civil War. He attended Rush Medical College in Chicago and received his degree in 1879. He moved to Ysleta in 1881 and practiced there until he opened an office in El Paso. He was a member of the El Paso Pioneer Association.

Mrs. Frances Hatfield, author of "First Physicians of El Paso County," says Vilas was county physician in 1888 and city physician in 1889.

"He was county physician again in 1898 and president of the Board of Health.

"Dr. Vilas volunteered for service during the Spanish-American War and was major surgeon of the 1st Texas Volunteer Infantry Co., 1st Division Hospital, 7th Army Corps.

"**DR. VILAS WAS** a Knight Templar, 32nd degree Mason and a Shriner. He retired



Virginia Turner

from practice in 1909 and moved to California. He died at his home in Stockton on April 2, 1929."

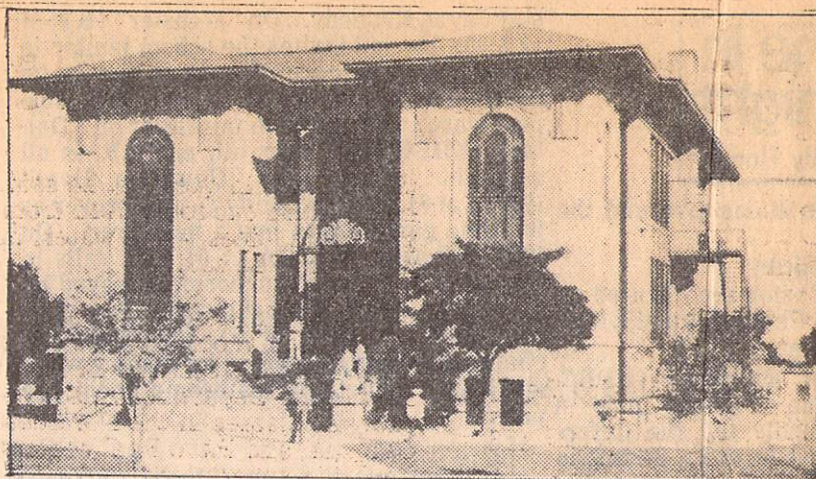
Mrs. Hatfield quotes the late **Mrs. Hugh White**, wife of a pioneer El Paso doctor who wrote stories about early El Paso for her grandchildren. One titled, "Doctors I have Known," contained this observation about Dr. Vilas:

"He was a handsome, stocky man of compelling personality. He lived across the street from Hotel Dieu, in a house later occupied by the **Dr. Francis W. Gallagher** family and after that, the **Dr. Michael Phillip Schuster** family. Dr. Vilas bought a one-story house on Wyoming and Oregon Streets and set up office there.

"**HE WAS A** strong, convincing person and never minced words. He left no doubt as to what he meant."

Dr. Vilas served on the El Paso Public School Board from 1904 until 1908.

Mrs. Miriam Feinberg Lait, assistant principal of Vilas, said the school has had three additions since it was built. It is now being refurbished and



Vilas School in 1909

additional classrooms are planned, she said.

"When Vilas celebrated its 50th anniversary, it had 311 students, 10 teachers and five grades. Now it has 34 homeroom classes and 40 faculty members."

The principal is **Miss Evangelina Sanchez**, and grades have been increased from kindergarten to sixth grade.

MRS. HARVEY B. JONES, Vilas' great-granddaughter, and **Mrs. Helen Stevenson**, his granddaughter, live in El Paso.

"Students are preparing a fabric collage of events of the past 75 years," Mrs. Lait said. "Music classes are learning songs from the past seven decades and language arts students will interview former students."

Ex-teachers, principals and alumni of the school are asked to get in touch with Mrs. Lait, who hopes owners

of antique cars will also lend a hand.

What a great way to honor a pioneer and celebrate a homecoming at the same time!

Dis 'n data

FRANK ACOSTA, a longtime worker on Mount Cristo Rey arrangements, hopes the lighting of the statue will be by connecting with existing El Paso Electric Co. lines, rather than an attempt to put a generator on top of the mountain.

"There'd be the maintenance of the generator — refueling — and a fence to protect it from vandalism," he said.

"We could run the line there and use a photoelectric cell so lights would go on automatically at night.

Virginia Turner is a columnist for the El Paso Herald-Post.

Vilas School brings back memories

By Ramon Renteria
Times staff writer

Leon Krupp brought a stack of memories to celebrate the 75th birthday of Vilas Elementary School.

Back in the 1920s, Krupp was a young schoolboy fascinated by caramel suckers and "goody goody" snow-cones at the Sunset Heights Grocery.

And it was not unusual, he said, for school officials to be overly fire conscious at the two-story brick building at 220 Lawton.

Krupp recalled how the fire drill bells rang one day and children quickly spilled into the schoolyard.

"There wasn't any fire," he said. "Who was it? But Admiral Richard Byrd flying from the Arctic to the Antarctic, and we got to see that airplane fly over Vilas School."

Krupp and an estimated 300 other peo-

ple, generations young and old, Thursday night celebrated the past and present and pondered the future of the Sunset Heights neighborhood school, one of the oldest public schools in El Paso.

Krupp studied at Vilas from 1922 to 1928. He later became an El Paso dentist.

Back in the Model-T days in El Paso, he said, "If a teacher had a husband who could provide for her, no matter how qualified she was, she could not get a job."

All the single teachers got job preference.

For a child growing up in Sunset Heights, life was much more tranquil then. Neighborhood residents rarely locked their doors.

The track stars of Vilas practiced running up and down an alley.

Everybody walked to school — a mile or two from home didn't matter. And a

rainy day meant the kids would have a temporary swimming hole somewhere in the neighborhood.

For Adelaide Ratner, a Vilas alumna and former schoolteacher, the fondest memories were of the good people that populated the neighborhood.

"Kids didn't talk back to teachers. There was no such thing as goofing off in school," she said.

Lorenzo Menchaca, a 1930s alumnus, came to reminisce a little and to show off an article about his son, Al Menchaca, a civil engineer who just finished supervising a mammoth aquarium project in California.

The cornerstone of the school was laid Jan. 13, 1909, and classes opened in September.

The school itself was designed by the architectural firm of Trost and Trost.

•Please see Vilas, 6B



Adelaide Ratner, center, and Dr. Leon Krupp, right, both Vilas students during the 1920s, get a school tour by assistant principal Mimi Lait.

—Times photo by Luis Villalobos

11-16-84

Vilas

•Continued from 1B

which left a legacy of historical buildings in El Paso.

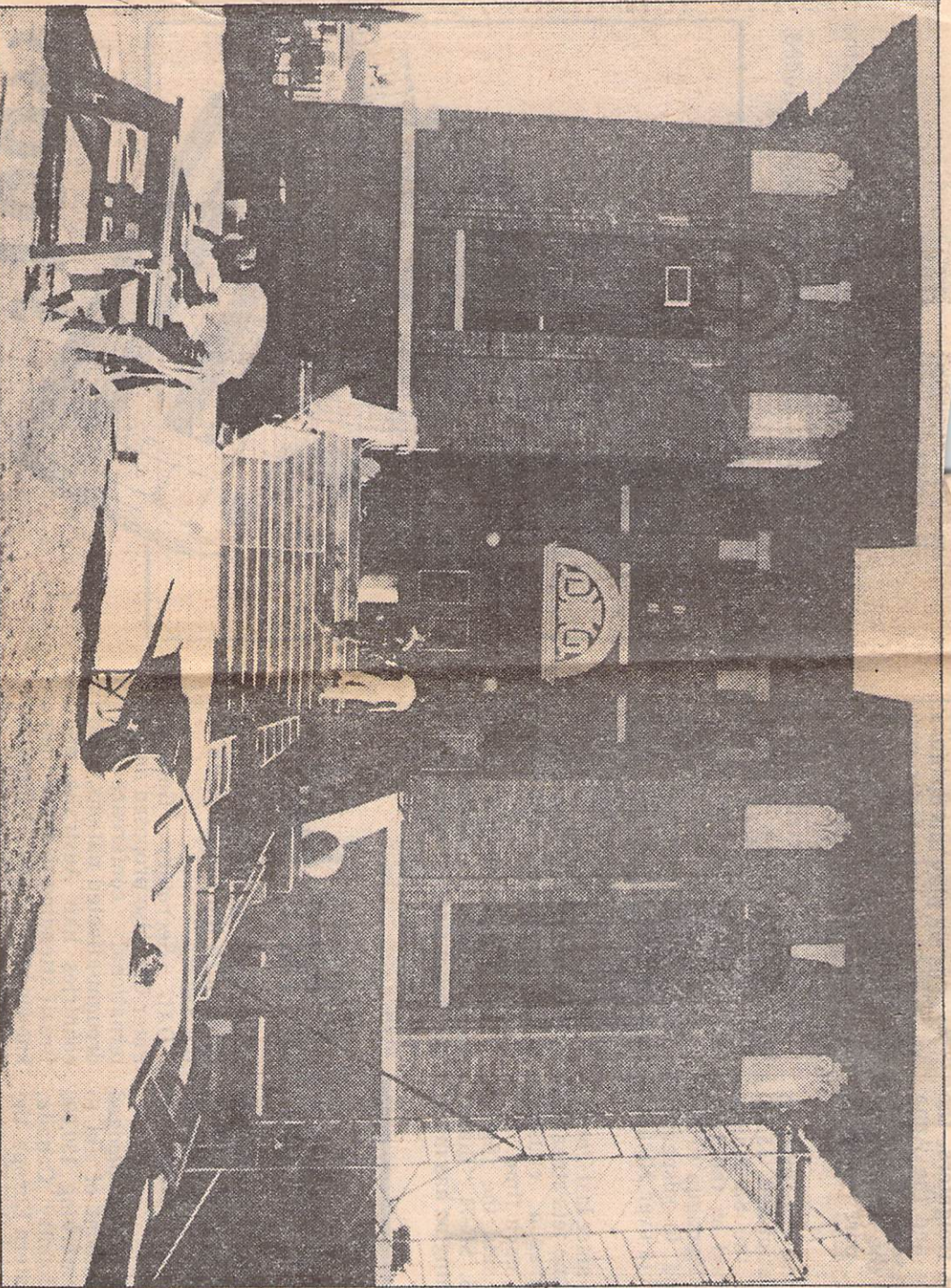
Architect Patrick Rand traced the history of the school's namesake, Walter N. Vilas, a pioneer El Paso physician and civic leader who performed an autopsy on the slain gunslinger John Wesley Hardin.

"Because of the dedication to his profession and the higher elements of El Paso society, Dr. Vilas may not be as well known as the gunslingers and the madames who were in the El Paso

area at that time," Rand said. "But Dr. Vilas and others like him set the pattern for the leaders of our city today."

The present generation of Vilas schoolchildren composed a song, "It's a Grand Old School," to commemorate the anniversary. And they filled a time capsule with memorabilia of the 1980s.

Vilas patrons opening the time capsule in 25 years will find Michael Jackson paraphernalia, Cabbage Patch doll berets, jelly shoes, and information about a daring vice presidential contender named Geraldine Ferraro.



Workers from Rocky Mountain Coatings refurbish Vilas School, El Paso's oldest operating school.

Herald-Post photos by John Hopper

75 years of memories

Times 8-4-84

Historic school in Sunset Heights prepares to celebrate anniversary

By Ramon Renteria
Times staff writer

Vilas School is like an ancient postcard, full of life and memories.

In its infant days, the children of prominent El Paso families, entrepreneurs and politicians were educated in the two-story beige brick building at 220 Lawton.

Now Vilas Elementary — vintage 1909 — is dressing up for its 75th birthday.

The school's namesake was Walter N. Vilas, pioneer El Paso medical doctor and turn-of-the-century school board member.

With Mamie Patterson as its first principal, the school embraced equal opportunity long before the idea of women as managers was popular.

The first parents of Vilas school erected elaborate mansions on the hills of Sunset Heights and then got busy shaping a village into a city.

In subsequent generations, Vilas School touched many notable El Pasoans, among them semi-retired screen star and television personality Gilbert Roland.



— Times photo by Joel Salcido

•Please see School, 5B

Evangelina Sanchez, principal of Vilas Elementary, is getting things ready for the school's 75th anniversary.

School

•Continued from 1B

Roland, a Juarez native and the only local boy to strike it big in Hollywood, often returned to visit Alma Bartlett, his seventh-grade teacher at Vilas. He liked to boast that she encouraged him to do something with his life.

In the late 1970s, the entire school would gather once a week around the flagpole for a special patriotic ceremony.

Today, Vilas is still a hub of Sunset Heights. It caters to about 600, predominantly Hispanic,

students.

Assistant Principal Miriam Lait is hunting for former students, principals and teachers — anyone who ever drifted in and out of Vilas School. She is coordinating the anniversary celebration for Nov. 15.

"We're hoping to bring the past and present together."

Any bits of information about former Vilas patrons or employees can be passed on to Lait at the school, 532-5993.

Yvonne Chew landed at Vilas as an assistant principal and

stayed two years. She is now a reading consultant for the El Paso school district.

Chew liked working in a historical stage of sorts. Some elements stand out in her memory of Vilas: relatively good student achievement, abundant school spirit and unselfish community support.

"The school was always very much involved, almost like a community center," Chew said. "Before the renovation, Vilas was like a postage stamp playground."

Cesar Fourzan enrolled in first grade at Vilas and later became an El Paso educator. Fourzan rose through the school district's ranks and once served as summer principal at Vilas. He retired as an assistant superintendent in the El Paso school district.

"The neighborhood being so close, there used to be a lot of community cohesiveness," he said. "There's always been good administration — the leadership of the school is what determines the participation."

City's oldest school to mark 75th year

By Charles Ellis

El Paso Herald-Post education reporter

Board members, the superintendent and old graduates — from out of town and out of the country — will attend tonight's 75th anniversary celebration at Vilas School.

The school, at 220 Lawton Drive in the Sunset Heights, was built in 1909 and was a two-story structure of stone and brick. Now, 75 years later, it has had three additions built to it.

It's the oldest school in El Paso still in operation. It is being refurbished this year and more classrooms are planned for the school, which has about 600 students in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Miriam Lait, assistant principal, started preparing students for the anniversary celebration at the beginning of the school year. Students in Sharon Heider's sixth-grade class wrote letters to many ex-students and "received many answers," Lait said.

Earlier this week, students launched helium-filled balloons. The balloons were filled with messages that told people who picked up the balloons to call the school and find out about what's happening at the school this week.

And at 7:30 p.m. today, the school welcomes back its old graduates. Pat Rand, an El Paso architect and Vilas graduate, will give a biographical sketch of Dr. Walter Vilas, for whom the school was named.

Vilas was born in Red Creek, N.Y., in 1847. He enlisted with the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in 1863 and served until the close of the Civil War. He moved to Ysleta in 1881 and practiced medicine there until he opened an office in El Paso. Vilas served on the El Paso school board from 1904 to 1908.

Other speakers will include Ron McLeod, El Paso Independent School District superintendent; Burton Johnson, associate superintendent for the West area, and Paul Carlton, president of the El Paso school board.

Students will sing songs from each of the seven decades the school has been in existence. They will also sing three school songs — including a new one written in honor of the occasion.

After the assembly, rooms will be set aside for different groups of Vilas graduates — 1909-30, 1931-45, 1946-60, 1961-74 and 1975-84, she said.

Prominent El Pasoans who attended Vilas include current teachers Carmen Armendariz and Lupe Duke, as well as actor Gilbert Roland, Judge Edwin Berliner, Ruth Kahn, Adelaide Ratner, Elman Chapa, David Goodman, Archie Goodman, Celia Ronquillo, Sam Schneider, Myer Erlich, Hector Ayoub and Rosalio Aguilar.



From top, Debbie Villalva, 10, Norma Bueno, 9, and Sophie Acosta, 10, practice a choral tribute for Vilas School anniversary celebration.