

# Sunshine Hill 'was more than a school – a community center is what it was'

By BERRY CRAIG

The doors of Sunshine Hill School in Columbus closed nearly 64 years ago, and the building burned in 1985.

"It was more than a school – a community center is what it was," Rosie Nell Harper told me for a *Paducah Sun* story in 1979.

The Black school was built during the Jim Crow era when segregation and race discrimination were the law and the social order in the South and in border states like Kentucky. White pupils attended a larger and better equipped brick schoolhouse in the middle of Columbus.

Harper, who is deceased, lived near the foot of the grassy hill that shared its name with the school.

Church congregations sat down to box dinners on the hillside. Movies, plays and gospel music programs were put on at the schoolhouse. "There was a Christmas pageant every year, added Harper, who finished the eighth grade at Sunshine Hill before being bused 30 miles to a Black high school at Hickman, the Fulton County seat.

White state school authorities in Kentucky and other Jim Crow states insisted that their public education systems afforded Black and white students "separate but equal" educational opportunities.

Segregation meant separate and un-

equal. "The dual system of segregated schools...itself suggested inequality," wrote James C. Klotter and Craig Thompson Friend in *A New History of Kentucky*.

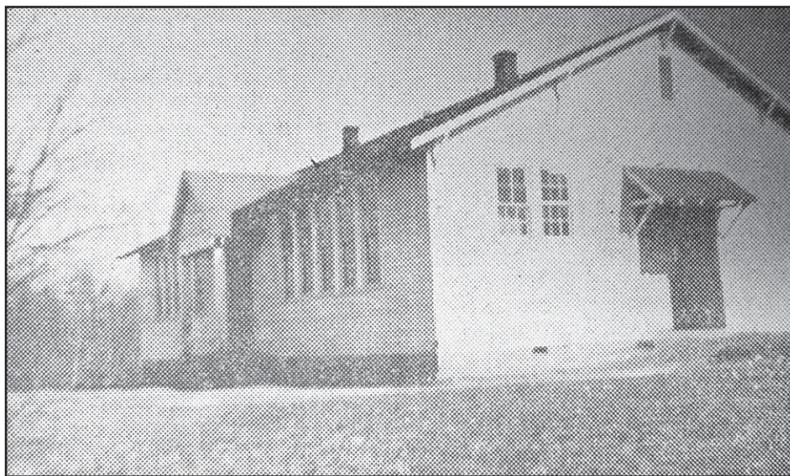
"Moreover, in practice, school buildings for Black pupils generally did not match those for whites, and only the support from various outside funding agencies, such as the Rosenwald Fund, allowed the construction of some schools. African Americans also often received as their textbooks the worn-out leftovers from white classrooms."

Even so, the authors added, that Black "schools still remained a highly prized part of community life."

According to state records, Sunshine Hill School was built in 1931-1932 with \$125 in contributions from Blacks, \$2,320 in state funding and an additional \$875 from the Rosenwald Fund, which was established in 1917 by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald of Chicago, longtime president and part-owner of Sears, Roebuck and Co.

While school equipment and supplies were in short supply, there was always an abundance of love, according to Harper. She recalled mothers who got together to provide hot lunches for students. "They all helped out around that great big old cook stove. They even brought their babies."

Youngsters sat on wooden benches at long tables that were piled high with



Sunshine Hill School, Columbus, Ky., shown here in a 1953 Gazette photo

meat, vegetables and assorted desserts, Harper said.

"Everybody liked the butter rolls," she remembered. The recipe for the caramel-laced pastry reportedly was published in an official state cookbook for elementary schools.

Friday nights at Sunshine Hill meant motion pictures brought up from Hickman by a Black woman. "I can't remember her name," Harper said "But we'd have popcorn and Kool-Aid, and I think children could get in for 15 cents and adults 30 cents.

Other times Sunshine Hill pupils would perform plays or sit with their parents,

enjoying performances by gospel pianist Dave Williams of Milan, Tennessee.

"And we had plays – some real good ones," said Harper, adding, "I thought a lot of that old place."

Two families were living in the school building when it burned, but no one was hurt, according to the late Sheriff Virgil Clark.

Sunshine Hill pupils were transferred to all-Black Kane School in Clinton, which closed with school desegregation. Today, public school pupils attend Hickman County High School, Middle School, Elementary School and Pre-school in Clinton.

# Magistrates decline salary increase; Feb. 3 proclaimed "Darrell Sims Day," among fiscal court discussion

By GAYE BENCINI

Hickman County Fiscal Court met in regular session on Monday, Feb. 23 at 8 a.m. in the Hickman County Judge/Executive's Office. Present were Hickman County Judge/Executive Kenny Wilson, Magistrates Henry Cole, Irvin Stroud, and Kory Naranjo; Administrative Assistant Hillary Webb, County Treasurer Amy Leslie, Deputy Judge/Executive Dawn Allen, County Attorney Jason Batts, and visitors Hickman County Emergency Management Director Dylan Jewell, Road Foreman Kelly Byassee, FEMA Applicant Agent Justin D. Jackson, Sheriff Ben Natividad, Troy Carter, Kessley Baker and Nolan Webb with the Kentucky Division of Forestry; Sam Harris with Hutson, Inc., and Gaye Bencini.

## Magistrates decline magistrate's salary increase

During Monday's fiscal court meeting, the Hickman County magistrates voted unanimously to decline a salary increase of 2.7 percent for themselves.

Hickman County Judge/Executive Kenny Wilson said the state sets the salary for judge/executive, sheriff, county clerk, etc. The counties have no control over that. However, the counties may set the salaries for the county attorneys, coroners, and magistrates.

Magistrate Henry Cole said he felt they should decline the proposed CPI (consumer price index) increase of 2.7 percent retroactive to January 1. Magistrate Kory Naranjo seconded Cole's motion, and Magistrate Stroud voted in favor of declining it was well.

They approved the CPI salary increase of 2.7 percent retroactive to January 1 for the coroner and county attorney.

## Proclamation for Darrell Sims Day in Hickman County

Clinton resident and Hickman County Ambassador Darrell Sims passed away Feb. 5. Hickman County Judge/Executive Kenny Wilson noted Darrell's contributions to the community and his waiting on the corner to catch the bus to ride to work in Mayfield, rarely, if ever, missing a day.

The fiscal court approved a proclamation Monday declaring Feb. 3 as "Darrell Sims Day" in Hickman County, for an annual day of remembrance.

The proclamation stated: "Whereas, Hickman County Ambassador Johnny Darrell Sims was a shining light and a beloved member of this community for 65 years,

Whereas, Darrell was truly one of a kind; always with a smile, hug or just his enthusiastic wave to everyone he met,

Whereas, Darrell's kindness, warmth, and genuine love for people left a lasting impression on us all,

Whereas, We believe it's important to remember Darrell by always celebrating his life and how he touched us all and made this community a better, brighter place to live,

Now there, be it resolved, that I, Kenny Wilson

Hickman County Judge/Executive, proudly declare February 3 as Darrell Sims Day in Clinton, Hickman County, and encourage us all to honor, celebrate and always remember his remarkable legacy.

Judge Wilson said Feb. 3 was Darrell's birthday.

## County and Kentucky Division of Forestry to have cooperative agreement for work through grant funded program

Kessley Baker, wildland fire mitigation specialist with the Kentucky Division of Forestry, attended the fiscal court meeting Monday. Baker said Hickman County has sustained damage from many weather events in the past few years. The storm weather data base tracked Hickman County for 130 different weather-related weather events since 2020.

"Most of them being severe winds, damaging storms," Baker said. "KDF has determined that Hickman County has a higher wildfire risk than usual, meaning we have the initiative to do some wildfire mitigation efforts and preparedness efforts," she said.

She said the state Tornado Strike Team works in western Kentucky providing different services for landowners.

"But, in order to do any wildfire risk reduction, the area has to be covered under a community wildfire protection plan. That is basically a disaster plan," she said. She said she would like to prepare a plan for Hickman County and would work with Hickman County Interim Emergency Management Director Dylan Jewell.

Baker's colleague, Nolan Webb, who works with the strike team, said they work through a grant funded program to return properties to their former state after a damaging storm.

The plan discussed by Baker and Webb mainly focuses on identifying areas of concern. The plan does not involve any legal obligation to or requirements from the county or land owners, Baker said.

The fiscal court voted to proceed with the plan. County Attorney Jason Batts will review it, and if all looks well, KDF can move forward.

## Dual Role Authorization of Emergency Management Director

The fiscal court approved the dual role authorization agreement with the sheriff's department concerning Sheriff's Deputy Dylan Jewell. Jewell is also working as interim Hickman County Emergency Management Director. The dual role authorization is legal paperwork concerning his filling of both positions and being available to work with emergency management matters as they arise.

## Hickman County Fire & Rescue Financial Reports

The fiscal court approved the Hickman County Fire & Rescue General Account- Income Statement for the year ending Dec. 31, 2025. A few years back, the county agreed to allow the fire & rescue to put a \$50 fee on the county tax bills with the stipulation that

they provide annual income statements to the county.

General Account: The ending balance as of Dec. 31, 2025 was \$68,158.63. Revenues came from subscriber fee income (\$64,823.99); Donations (\$2,135.00); Grants (\$14,500); and interest (\$566.85) for a total income of \$82,025.84. Expenses ranging from equipment, repairs, insurance, fuel fees, internet, supplies, etc. were \$88,161.39.

State Aid Income Statement: beginning Balance as of Jan. 1, 2025: \$14,526.45

Revenues: Transfer from General Account- Grant Income- \$14,500.00/Interest- \$13.06; Total income- \$14,513.06

Expenses: Equipment- \$3,428.47; Building Repairs- \$14,500; Total Expense- \$17,928.47. Ending balance as of Dec. 31, 2025- \$11,111.04.

Savings: Beginning Balance - \$12,088.34 Donation- (an estate)- \$10,000; Interest- \$14.00; Total Income- \$10,014.

Ending Balance Dec. 31, 2025- \$22,102.34.

Bank Account Income Statement: Beginning Balance Jan. 1- \$1,740.05; Revenues: Subscriber Fee Income- \$842.60. Ending Balance Dec. 31, 2025- \$2,582.65

## Fiscal Court to purchase road dept. equipment

In other discussion, Sam Harris with Hutson Inc., was present at the meeting to discuss possible purchase of a flex wing rotary cutter, a skid steer, and a lawn mower. Road Foreman Kelly Byassee was also present and provided input.

After discussion and review of material presented to the magistrates prior to the meeting, action was taken to approve purchase of a FC10R Flex Wing Rotary Cutter with trade in of a 2021 John Deere R10 for a total cost of \$20,642.72.

Action was taken to purchase a John Deere 331 P-Tier Track Loader with trade in of a 2021 John Deere for a total cost of \$56,092.00

Action was taken to approve purchase of a 2026 John Deere Z950R ZTrak lawn mower for \$9,757.73.

## Other:

The fiscal court voted to approve:

- Misc. line-item transfers
- General Fund to Road fund WEX (gas card)- \$912.77
- Jail fund to Road Fund- WEX- \$83.07
- EM to Road fund- WEX- \$51.44
- Road Fund to General Fund- Dawn- \$2,390.85
- General Fund to Road fund- Truck Tax License- \$60,000
- Chamber dues in the amount of \$50.00
- Sponsor 2026 Sweet "16" Birthday Bash at HCHS (teaches safety issues related to driving) \$100.00

The Chamber brunch is March 21 at 10 a.m. at the Young Center.

The next meeting of the Hickman County Fiscal Court is March 23 at 8 a.m.