



A view of Chesaning High School as it appeared in the early 1900s

Poor boy returns a millionaire

'Never stop working,' he'll tell 100th Chesaning class

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CHESANING — In the early 1900s, Warren C. Ward, Sr., walked four miles to Chesaning High School "so I wouldn't have to be a laborer all my life."

He was 13.

Now, the 89-year-old millionaire shuffles more than a mile to work at his publishing company in downtown Chicago.

Ward graduated from Chesaning High School

in 1910. He was the only boy in his class of six. His father, Lewis, was in the high school's first graduating class 100 years ago.

Next month, Ward will return to Chesaning High School. He'll be guest speaker May 14 at a "welcome home" party celebrating the school's 100th graduation. He'll have a lot to say.

The story of his life, told in a telephone interview from Chicago, lasts an hour.

He graduated from high school when William Howard Taft was president and the U.S. government was pushing for a nationwide income tax.

Ward grew up "on the poorest farm in Midland County. I was one of the poorest kids who went to Chesaning High School," he said. His family grew potatoes, corn and beans on a small patch of land.

"We got by, we never did go hungry," he said. "But we never had any luxuries." Poverty pushed him to school.

"I wanted to get enough education to get above the level of my surroundings in Midland Coun-

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ty," he said. "I didn't want to be a laborer all my life."

Ward attended a one-room country school in Poseyville, just south of Midland, until the 8th grade.

After that, "my mother encouraged me to get out on my own and get a high school education," he said. To get to high school, he needed money. Chesaning students paid \$15 a year tuition.

"I was a strong, healthy boy at 12, almost as tall as I am now," he said. "I knew where I was headed. I left home one morning and at 10:30 I had a job."

He moved from farm to farm, harvesting hay and grain, and earned \$1 a day until he saved \$70.

During the school year, he groomed horses and lawns and cleaned furnaces to pay for room and board.

There were four high school teachers, he remembered. Classes weren't much different than those today — chemistry, physics, Latin, algebra and geometry.

"Kids didn't go to high school then unless they lived near town or in town," he said. "They just didn't go to high school unless they lived within walking distance."

After graduating, Ward worked in a shoe store

for \$6 a week. Six months later, he was hired to teach in a one-room school near Merrill. For more than a year, he earned \$45 a month teaching 50 students in eight grades.

"I had no experience, except that I went to a country school myself," he said. "Those days you didn't need to know much." He was one of only three teachers in the county with a high school diploma.

While waiting in the summer of 1912 to start his second year of teaching, Ward sold maps door to door in Midland. He made \$6 a day. At one door, he met a man who sold encyclopedias.

"Right away, I saw that he had a much better deal than I did," Ward said. He dropped his maps and made \$35 in one day selling encyclopedias.

"Making that much money in one day was such a big thing for me, I didn't sleep all night," he said. "I decided to forget about teaching."

By the time Ward was 25, he was partner in an encyclopedia publishing company. At 36, already a millionaire, he bought his partner out and changed the name of the company from Welles Brothers Publishing Co. to Standard Education Corp. His company publishes the New Standard Encyclopedia.

He since has founded two distributing firms and a finance company that makes it easier for distributors to buy his books.

His son Warren Jr. runs the finance company. His grandson Peter Ewing is president of the publishing firm. Ward has nine grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

Ward lives in Evanston, a suburb of Chicago, takes the train to the city and walks to work from the station.

Ward said he is looking forward to the trip to Chesaning, where his father and mother were born and his grandparents are buried. He's been back only a few times since he graduated.

"I knew everybody in town in 1910, but the most of them are dead," he said. "They're all gone. I don't know a single one who's living. But I hope to find somebody who knows me."

Ward will have advice for this year's 250 Chesaning graduates: Never stop working.

"So many kids are spoiled by having everything handed to them," he said. "They don't have to do too much for themselves. It's too easy a life and I think it shows."

The centennial celebration will begin 5 p.m. Saturday, May 14, at the Peet Community Center in Chesaning. Anybody who ever attended the high school is invited. The 25th and 50th graduating classes also will be honored.

Shirlene Bila of Chesaning, organizer of the event and a 1958 graduate of the high school, said reservations are due Friday and that more information is available by phoning her at 845-2469.