
EARLY NOVATO SCHOOLS

Early settlers in Novato fit the traditional pattern of residents in any small town across the United States. Families had to be fed, sheltered, have a place to worship and one in which to educate their children. Novato's first one-room schoolhouse served for a time as both school and church.

The *Marin Journal* of July 27, 1899, reported a small schoolhouse built in Novato in 1859 and that the Novato township was made a school district August 12, 1862. Trustees that year were P. Smith, M. Durgin, and G. F. Van Hollen. (The Van Hollen Hotel, located in the original Old Town, is shown on an 1866 map at the Novato History Museum.) There were 37 students in 1861.

The location of the first school, which also served as a church, is believed to have

been where the Shell Station is today in the vicinity of DeLong Avenue and Redwood Boulevard.

In 1875, it was evident that the little school building was inadequate. A three-acre site was deeded to the Novato School District for \$289.50 by Francis DeLong and Joseph B. Sweetser, owners of the Novato Rancho. After a larger school was built, the first schoolhouse apparently was moved off the site. That small school building, vacated in 1875, served as the residence of Judge Haven and his family in November 1889 while they were awaiting completion of their new home after their first home was destroyed by fire.

The second school, costing \$1,800, was described as "neat within and elegant without with a cupola towering up from

Novato's second school. The electorate approved the expenditure of \$2,500 in 1872 to build a new schoolhouse. The school that was completed in 1875 at a cost of \$1,800, consisted of one room. The three rooms added about 20 years later are the front section in the photo. The original one-room is the rear section of the school. Front section is now part of Mr. Tainter's furniture business at 7400 Redwood Blvd. (Courtesy Marin County Historical Society Museum.)





Rebecca Mrs. Galt with Eugene Zarnes, with Constantine A. and S. in camp, N. H. 1891. (The first of the group.)

the front some 20 feet." Behind the school was a shed where students kept the horses they rode to school. On the school grounds were immense boulders believed to have been brought there during the glacial period.

By 1888, there were 76 school age children — 43 boys and 33 girls — between the ages of 5 and 17 in Novato. (There were 30 children under the age of 5.) School enrollment included Black Point, but the Ignacio children attended school in the San Jose District, in a schoolhouse donated by the Pacheco family. Some people favored consolidating the Novato and San Jose School Districts, having two teachers in one school rather than one teacher in each of the two schools.

There were recurring problems with attendance and frequently the older children stayed away or were kept at home to help their parents. The School District

was designated very early as a total school — that is, grammar through high school. By the end of the 1888 school year, however, it was noted that none of the children attending that year were over the age of 12 or 13 which meant the school was rated too high. Many parents felt something should be done to justify the high school rating.

When there was a lone teacher instructing all grades, the character of that teacher was subject to careful scrutiny by members of the community. In one instance, an irate parent demanded that teacher, Mr. Flint, be investigated because of scandalous talk about "an intoxicated teacher, the outrageously poor discipline of the school and careless and inefficient teaching..." An investigation was carried out by County Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Furlong who visited Novato, accompanied by a reporter. The

Novato Grammar School students, 1895. Jennie Oliver is in back row, 3rd from left. Teacher - Mr. Houston



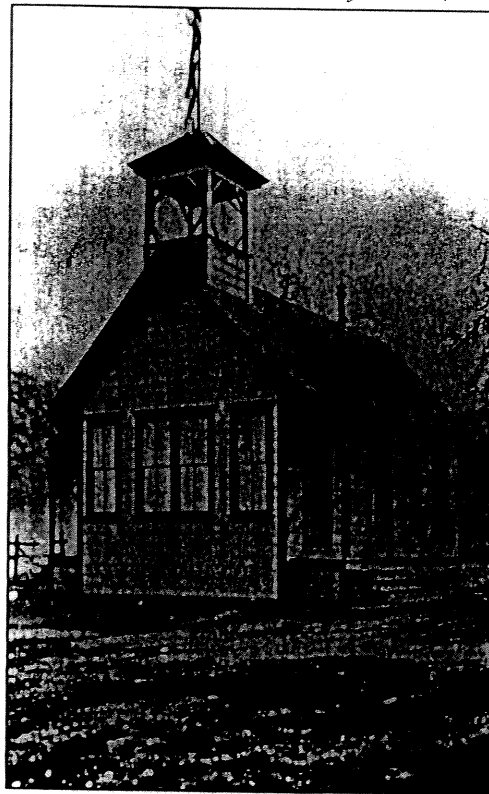
Superintendent met with school trustees and other prominent gentlemen, one of whom was Senator F. C. DeLong who made a lengthy declaration in Mr. Flint's favor. According to the Senator, Mr. Flint was "a highly educated, cultured gentleman, quiet and unassuming in his deportment." Senator DeLong stated that he was aware of Mr. Flint's indiscretion the previous year. It seems that while in a "weak condition" the teacher had indulged in a "potent stimulant and took one glass too many." The liquor was said to have been prescribed as an antidote to overwork and in an "unguarded moment, he fell victim to intemperance." Of course when he was seen in public in such a condition, the parents were extremely upset. Mr. Flint was prepared to fly from the Novato area to hide his shame over his "debauch" but friends persuaded him to remain. He had promised "all manner of reparations and to labor earnestly to live down the social crime against morality."

After hearing the Senator's testimonial and the glowing tributes of most of the trustees, Supt. Furlong felt Mr. Flint should continue in his teaching position. Nonetheless, public opinion in general appears to have been against the decision because Mr. Flint resigned the following month. The new teacher, Edward L. Collins, was described as a "young gentleman of scholarly attainment and high moral character."

The smaller school districts in Marin County kept their schools in session eight months of the year. Schedules depended on the weather. For some country schools, the dreadful condition of the roads in the rainy season meant mid-term vacation began in December and school resumed around the first of March if "the roads were good." Having an extended winter vacation required attending classes through part of the summer months.

Novato School was a popular center of community special events. On occasion, the San Jose and Dixie School Districts joined the Novato School District, as in March 1888 when a "Literary Entertainment and Spelling Match" was held in the Novato School. Attended by young and old alike, the schoolroom was "tastefully decorated with ferns and wild ivy...brilliantly illuminated with kerosene lamps and adamantine candles." There was music, both vocal and instrumental, and literary recitations. San Jose School District (Ignacio) was well represented by students Mary J. Myers, Maggie Keating, Estella Valencia, Mercedeo Pacheco, Maggie Gallagher and Olma Ball. In fact, the latter's recitation of "Guilty or Not Guilty" was hailed as the "gem of the evening." Little Lottie Hayden of Novato, age 3 and the youngest speaker, was equally sensational.

San Jose (Ignacio) School House, 1898 (Courtesy Marin County Historical Society Museum)



The spelling match was an "orthographical tournament" (conducted in writing) with all age groups taking part. A prize of \$20, offered by the principal for correctly spelling the list of words, went unclaimed. Here are the words used in the spelling match:

ferule	permain
conveyer	seepage or sipage
soder	tehee
six geese's (eggs)	Sweden
Kearny St.	Lazzaroni
Skye (terrier)	windrow
villder	Philippine
sitting (hen)	sagittarius
clevis	piccalilli
hollo (telephone call)	men-of-wars
diking	Heidsieck
Ben Jonson	Eschscholtzia

Everyone had a hilarious time. "Ex-Governor T. N. Machin and Assemblyman J. W. Atherton went down on 'geese's eggs.' Deputy P. M. McDonald contended that if the entire six eggs were the product of one goose, the spelling, in justice to the goose, ought to be in accordance with the facts in the case, regardless of any arbitrary requirements of grammar. Hon. F. C. DeLong, the orchardist, grappled unsuccessfully with 'Permain.' Lewis H. Bennet of Michigan missed 'Philippine' and fired 'Ypsilante' at the teacher in retaliation. Fred Sweetser was the only one to get 'Heidsieck' right. Miss Sullivan of the Dixie school and Miss Kershaw (of the San Jose School) smiled complacently over 'Eschscholtzia.' Mrs. DeLong proved to be the champion of the evening, missing only 7 words in the entire list. The entertainment was pronounced a success."

The school provided a place for both educational and social functions. Even the birds enjoyed being there. In April 1888, a reporter noted that a pair of wild Linnets made their nest on a windowsill of the schoolhouse. Both the eggs and later, the young Linnets were undisturbed by the comings and goings of all the children. That particular pair of Lin-

nets was said to return every Spring to their home at the school.

By 1893, the school population had outgrown the schoolhouse and two teachers were required. Miss Peters had charge of the high school students and Miss Collins taught the primary department in the vacant Armstrong home opposite the depot. (The Novato column of the *Sausalito News*, March 23, 1893, reported "Miss Carrie Shaw of San Francisco opened the primary department of Novato school March 13th," so perhaps Miss Collins began teaching in Fall, 1893.) In 1894, efforts were underway, spearheaded by Mr. and Mrs. Atherton, to sell \$5,000 worth of bonds in order to build a new schoolhouse. Apparently those plans withered on the vine because the end of the school year found the primary department still lodged in the Armstrong home.

Burdell School, originally located where Stafford Dam is today, was moved onto Grossi property in 1952 so the Dam could be built. The Burdell School District was formed in 1903.



In the Spring of 1896, Novato School District trustees were presented with plans for a new schoolhouse. The design called for four classrooms with sliding partitions; library in the rear forming "a stage to the upper classrooms; the front and main entrance by a tower 68 feet high, which supplies stairways, lavatories and cloak rooms.

Trustees had been aware for several years of the need for a larger school building, but had delayed calling an election to ask voters to approve the funding. The major stumbling block was a difference of opinion between Black Point residents and the rest of the electorate in the Novato area. The problem was resolved when Black Point formed its own school district. That section of Novato had listed only three census children in 1894, however that number had increased to 24 children in just two years.

In April 1896, a new school was proposed for Black Point to accommodate 50 pupils and residents of that district agreed to be taxed to pay for it. Enthusiasm was evident in the wish one resident expressed that "soon and long may the stars and stripes wave over the perfect little school house...."

Soon after the successful Black Point election, Novato citizens voted to add two rooms onto their own one-room school, rather than erect a new building, thus giving Novato's students one of "the most comfortable and spacious school buildings in the county." A year later, the schoolhouse was improved even more by the addition of a fourth room, a general remodeling, and a liberal use of paint.

By 1898, there were 130 students in the Novato School, taught by Professor Watson and Miss Clare Rogers. At that time, the Black Point School, now taught

Black Point School, 1895. Land was donated by the Dotters family and men of the Black Point community built the school with volunteer labor. There was no water so Mr. Dep Chain brought water each day for the students to drink and use for washing up. Black Point School was used also by residents as a meeting place. (Courtesy of Mrs. Peggy Morris)



by Miss Collins (she became the second wife of John Atherton in 1900) had 25 pupils.

In 1902, under the supervision of the new teacher, Miss Jessie Peters, the Black Point students and neighbors put on a splendid Christmas entertainment before a large audience. The program was as follows:

Recitation, Christmas Bells,
Herbert Jensen
Vocal solo, Tell Me Your Dreams I'll Tell
You Mine, Myrna Dotters
A Christmas Frolic, eight little ones
Recitation, Dora Dotters
Zither selection, Mr. Kuser and Mr. Riddle
Recitation, That Christmas Pie,
Harry Green
Vocal solo, The Christ Candle, Bessie Cain
Recitation, Three Little Lads, Hilbert
Jensen, Willie and Martin Stubbe
Vocal solo, Miss Cassidy
Recitation, Prue's Christmas Party,
Ethel Collins
The Dance of the Waves, eight little ones
Recitation, Something or Nothing,
Irene Small
Vocal solo with violin accompaniment,
Mrs. Lewis
Recitation, The Trapping of Santa Claus,
Leslie and Selby Dotters
Zither selection, Messrs Kuser and Riddle
Vocal solo, Miss Green
Instrumental solo, Miss Myrna Dotters
Farce, Killing Time:
Cast - Lady Desmond, Miss Maude Moore
Captain Charles Lemley, Albert
Cain Servant, Will Cain

There was a Christmas Tree, and Santa Claus in the person of Mr. Warren assured the success of the event.

In 1910, Gertrude Simonds moved to Novato with her family and was enrolled in the Novato Grammar School. Describing the interior of the school, Gertrude (now Mrs. Serres) recalls that when you went in the front door, over in the corner there was a sink and a faucet where the children could get a drink of water. The first room you entered was about 8 by 12 feet in size and there were shelves where the students put their lunch pails.

Gertrude's first teacher was Miss Jessie Scott who taught first and second grades in one room. In the other classroom was Annie Braese (later Mrs. DeBorba) who taught third, fourth and fifth grades. In the third room, was the principal, Mr. Beck. Mr. Griffith succeeded Mr. Beck as principal and also taught sixth, seventh and eighth grades. According to Mrs. Serres, Mr. Griffith started the first library in Novato. He bought some lumber and built shelves over in one corner of his schoolroom. Then he went around the county asking people for books. He also bought books with his own money. A student simply told Mr. Griffith when borrowing a book or when returning one.

To graduate from Novato Grammar School and go on to San Rafael High School, students had to pass an examination. When Gertrude Simonds and her fellow students had completed the eighth grade, the regular teachers were not allowed to give the exam, so Mrs. Cole (the former Elodie Shreve) was brought in. When the examination was over, the papers were sent to San Rafael to be graded and sometimes it was four or five weeks before the students knew whether or not they had passed. If they passed, their diplomas were mailed to them.

The late Mrs. Frances Bond McGlaulin gave her impression of the second Novato School in her column "Down Memory Lane" in the *Novato Advance*. She wrote that it stood solid and gray-painted; had a bell tower, thick wooden shutters and a pot-bellied stove in each of the three school rooms. The 8th grade boys tended the stoves, coming to school early to bring in wood and light the fire to heat the rooms in winter months. Brick chimneys jutted from each of the three rooms. There was a slightly rickety back porch that led to an inside narrow washroom with only cold water, the only inside sanitary facilities. A few bandages were kept on a

long shelf for emergencies. The front porch provided a handy place for playing jacks or marbles.

The school yard was separated by a board fence — one side for boys and the other for girls. Children brought their lunches in tin pails. Mrs. McGlaulin wrote:

One family of three girls brought butterless slabs of homemade bread with salami as a filler. Their lunch menu never varied and the other girls were envious of the fare. All three had milked a string of cows before leaving their ranch home three miles away to drive to school in a wide horse drawn cart.

There were spelling bees, speeches of famous men to memorize, and handwriting lessons, all taught by three teachers. Black Point and Burdell schools each had only one teacher for the eight grades.

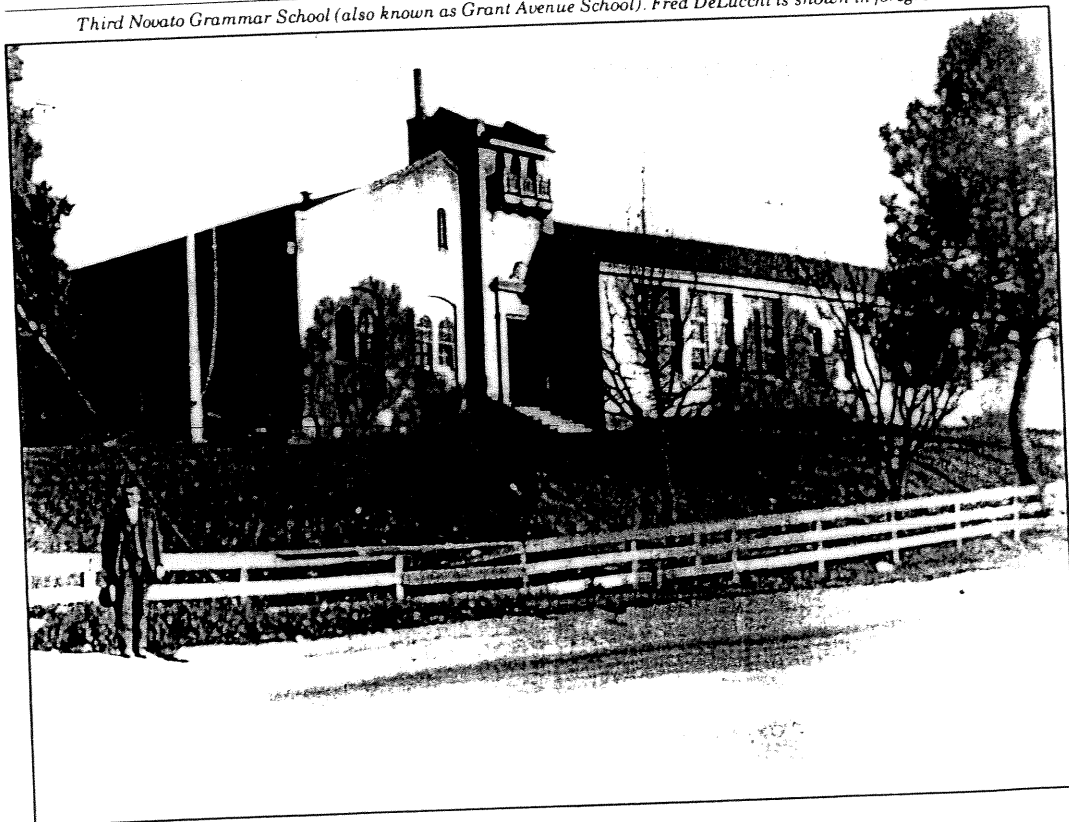
The school house was moved in 1922, to make way for a larger one. One-half of

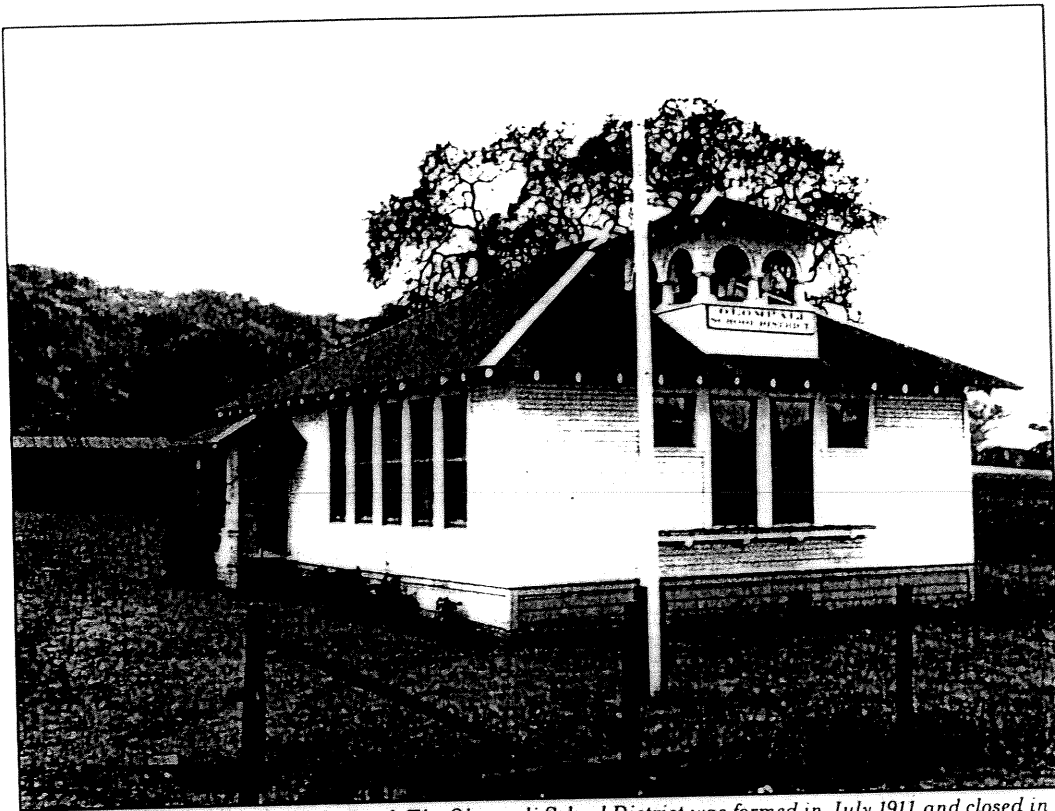
the building still remains at Sweetser Avenue and Redwood Boulevard where Eric Tainter has a used furniture business and warehouse.

The third school, built on the original site, and dedicated June 15, 1922, was grand indeed, consisting of six classrooms and an auditorium. A concrete building, costing \$35,000, it stood on a knoll on the corner overlooking Grant Avenue to the north and Highway 101 to the west. The *Novato Advance* called it "an asset that cannot be too highly prized." It was truly a source of pride for the residents of Novato. The students had a wonderful place behind the school for playing baseball and other games.

Although no longer in use by 1955, Grant Avenue School was still a handsome building when it was torn down in the early 1960's to allow commercial development of the site.

Third Novato Grammar School (also known as Grant Avenue School). Fred DeLucchi is shown in foreground.





Olompali School on San Antonio Road. The Olompali School District was formed in July 1911 and closed in July 1941. (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Cash)

One of the best known figures in the history of Novato schools was Miss Lulu Sutton. Born in Ignacio, and having lived in Novato as a small child, she returned here in 1918 on her first teaching assignment, and never left. Miss Sutton became principal of the Grant Avenue School in 1922, then when that school closed in the early 1950's, she became the first Principal of Olive School. After 40 years of service, Miss Lulu Sutton retired in 1958. In honor of those years of service, Lu Sutton School on Center Road bears her name.

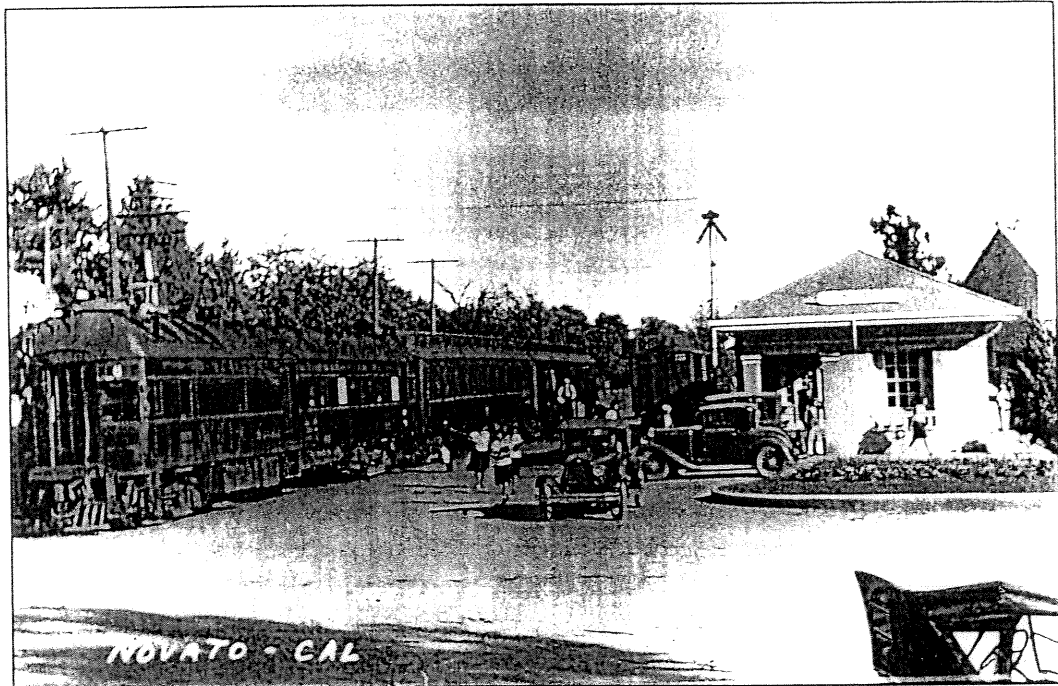
In 1947, Black Point District joined Novato District to become the Novato Union Elementary School District. About that time, there were 299 elementary students and a staff of six teachers. (High school pupils had to go to San Rafael or Petaluma.) The Grant Avenue School became overcrowded within a short time after the merger with Black Point so

Marion School was built on land previously owned by the Gness family.

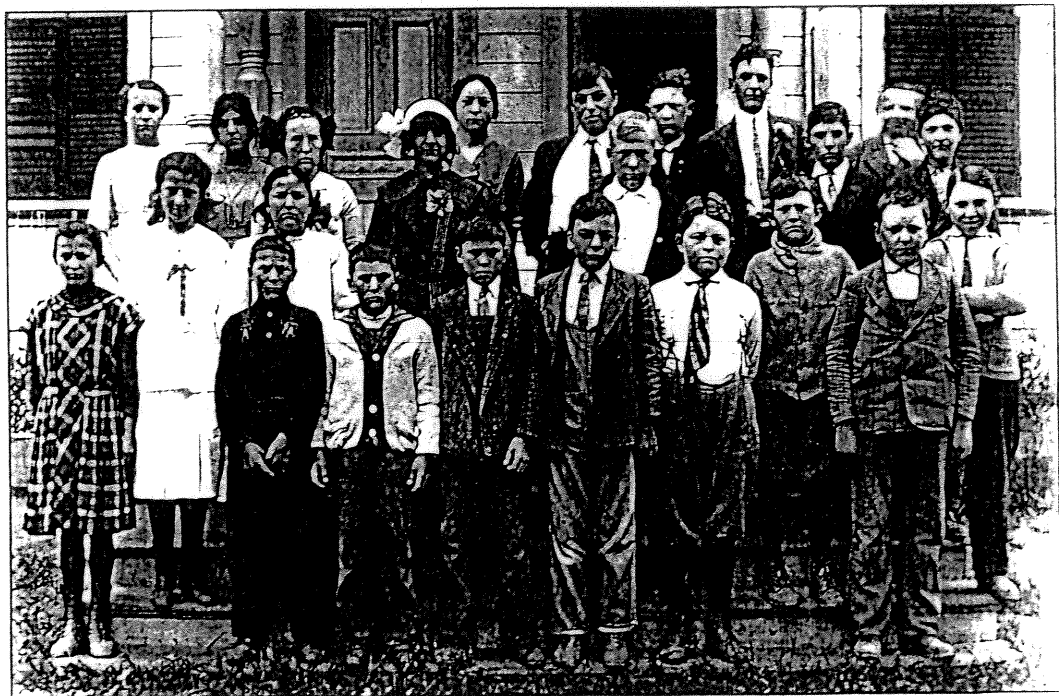
In 1954, the district became the Novato Unified School District allowing students to be taught in Novato throughout all 12 grades. Novato High School was constructed in 1957. Both the San Jose and Ignacio Districts joined the Novato District in 1966.

The 1950s and 60s brought a student population explosion and a boom in the construction of schools. By the beginning of the 1969/70 school year, there were nearly 12,000 students in 11 elementary schools, three Junior High and two High schools. In recent years, several schools have been closed due to diminishing enrollment. Projections indicate there is little possibility of the return to rapid growth of the student population in the foreseeable future.

Students returning to Novato by train from San Rafael High School, late 1920's



5th, 6th & 7th grades, 1908. (Left to right) Top row: Mary Augustine, Edith Verissimo, Ola McMullen, Rose Mattos, Evelyn Lobaugh, Fred Nave, Elton Carlile, Manuel Azevedo, Joseph Azevedo, Joe Wayne. Front row: Margaret Magetti, Irene Sasserna, George Mathias, Jenny Mancebo (behind Mathias), Joseph Baccaglio, Edward Gness, unidentified boy, Robert Trumbull, Wilhelm Rudolff, Ernest DeRosa, William Gness.



First and second grades, 1912. Teacher is Miss Meyers. Left to right: Top row: Margaret Warner, Lucy Regina, Annie Johnson, Mamie Joseph, Frances Hamilton, Eleanor Carille, Helen Trumbull, Lela Butler. Second row: Manuel Augustino, Joaquin DeBorja, Frank Azevedo, Eliza Regina, Mathias Louis, Tony Joseph, Hansen Warner, Tony Mathias, Manuel Brazil. Third row: Anita Herbarren, Edna Butler, Nina Vassallo, George Nunes, Manuel Joseph, Andre Azevedo, Bob Elsner, Harold Steffani, Alfred Bond, George Ross. Bottom row: Frank Baccaglio, Primo Trabucchi, Manuel "Babe" Silca, Teddy Dilena, Emily Rossi, Ida Trabucchi, Mary Dilena, Laurie Vassallo, Louis Rossi, Valenti Trabucchi.



First and second grades, 1920. Left to right: Top row: Ernest Aguilar, Fred Butler, Carrie Aguilar, unidentified boy, unidentified boy, Joe Nunes, Evelyn Belliveau, Vivian Herbarren, Arnold Heise. Middle row: Gus Gage, Aurelio Renati, Cora Fogliani, Robert Warner, Frances Warner, Clarence Leveson, Joaquin Almada, Pete Fogliani. Bottom row: Americo "Pete" Guerra, Robert Manzoni, Albert Gounard, Stella Renati, Irene Fogliani, Dorothy Hunsinger, Mae Verissimo, Dorothy Frisbie.



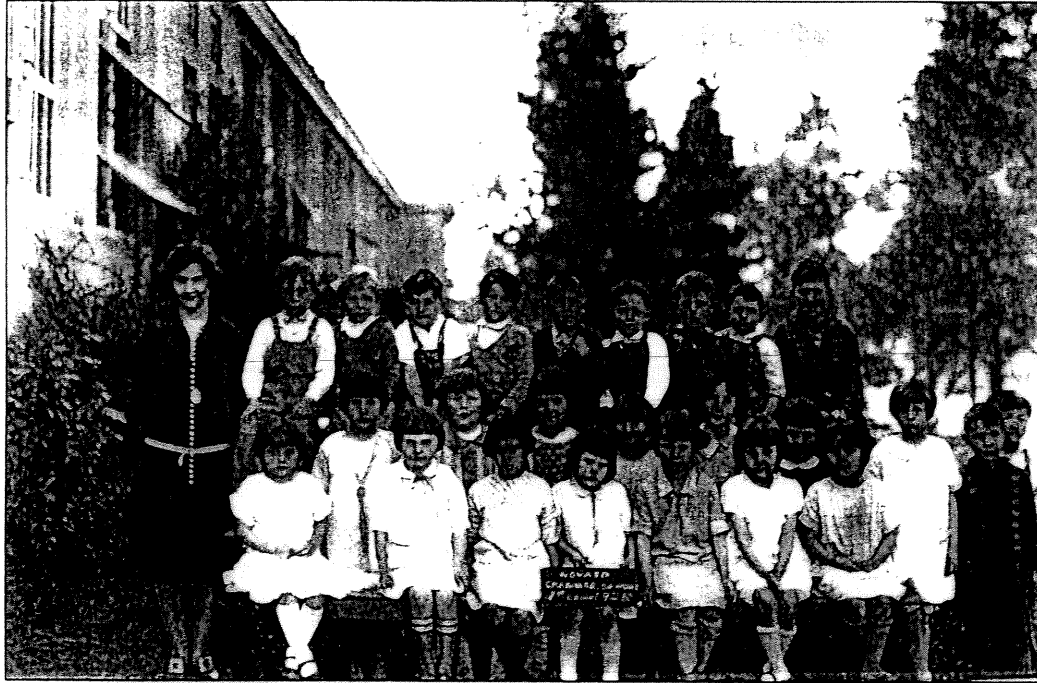
7th and 8th grades, 1921. (Left to right) Top row: Mary Dilena, Carolyn Zimmerman, Augusta Capelli, Manuel Silva, George Nunes, Alice Field, Mary Almeida, Trissy Regalia. Second row: Katherine Renati, Beatrice Lowry, Stella DeLucchi, Viola Clark, Ida Trabucchi, Teacher Miss Ida Doss, Merle Manville, Wilma Garr. Third row: Enid Porcella, Edith McDonald, Lena DeLucchi, Dorothy Warner, Viola Zecker, Lucia Lafranchi, Mary Nunes, Elsie Zeh, Betty Palmer. Bottom row: Harry Hanson, Frank Gray, Stanley Zecker, Walter Kiborn, Thomas Keena, Leon Hiribarren, Stanley Gustafson.



8th grade, 1925. (Left to right) Top row: Fred Tharsing, Upton Wise, Adolph Renati, Miss Lulu Sutton, Orlando Bigongiari, Arthur Kimes, Florence Thein, Suintina Zunino. Second row: Unidentified girl, Annabelle Peoples, Dorothy Cain, Mary Trabucchi, unidentified girl, Alta Cain, unidentified girl, Edna Baccaglio. Third row: Unidentified boy, unidentified boy, Guy Cain, Arnold Heise, Uziel Hawksworth, Tony Almada, Ralph Kokjer, unidentified girl, Joe Nunes. Bottom row: Bernard Keena, Virginia Randolph, Clara Almada, Mae Randolph, Marguerite Balz, Eleonora Lafranchi, Isabel Brazil.



1st grade, 1928. Teacher - Miss Edna Butler. Left to right: Top row - George Hale, Jack MacKenzie, Joey Bishop, Paul Warren, Ettore Bornadini, Bob Knight, Joey Gambetta, Louie Cavallero, Lester Sharrow. Second row - Anna Paladini, unidentified girl, Lucille Bellu, Bernice Sharrow, Bernice Basher, unidentified girl, Jane Simmons, unidentified boy, Warren Louie. Front row - Marian Rogala, Fernanda Paladini, Evelyn Cuppi, Irene Anita Sonn, Marian Pellegrini, Alice Harper.



7th and 8th grades, 1928. Teacher - Miss Lulu Sutton. Left to right: Top row - Benton Randolph, Homer Cain, Albert Gurno, Robert Warner, Lindo Gurno, Milton Maltz. Second row - Tony Brazil, Wesley Hairs, America Guerna, Leonard Penhale, Aurelio Benati, Mongan Safelt, Robert Mangoni. Third row - Clarence Lorenzini, Victoria Ferri, Clara Simoninighi, Mattie Jarvis, Frances Lewis, unidentified girl, Frances Warner, Anna Di Barberi, Mary Haddock. Front row - Alicia Benz, Julia Guerna, Charlotte Westlund, Dorothy Cary, Olga Lissi, Alice Simmons.

