

MATTHEW EDGAR PEARSON  
Superintendent of Kansas City, KS Public Schools  
1902-1932  
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FORMER SUPT. M. E. PEARSON  
(1902-1932)

**"I have loved the children and had abiding faith in the teachers."**

***Kansas Teacher and Western School Journal***, Volume XLV, Number Four, Sept 1937, pg. 5 - M. E. Pearson came to Kansas City, Kansas as a young man in 1886. After serving as a teacher and principal for sixteen years, he became superintendent in 1902 and served in that capacity for thirty more years. This thirty-year term will remain a most unusual one in the history of education in the United States. Mr. Pearson has seen the Kansas City staff grow from fifty-six teachers to seven hundred. His chief contributions were in the field of human relations, and he selected teachers with care and understanding. Since 1932 he has taught as a professor "with a human touch" in the junior college. In his letter of resignation as superintendent the spirit of the man was expressed when he said, "It has been a beautiful road from 1886 to 1932 - a great opportunity." - C.W.

***18th Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of Kansas City, Kansas for the Year 1904:*** p. 22 - "Kindergarten - It is to be regretted that kindergarten training is not given to the children of this city before they reach the age for admission to the first grade. Kindergartens have been established for so long a time in the schools of most cities of the country that they have become a recognized part in every complete system of schools. There is great demand for these schools in some of our school districts. This is particularly true in those communities where from the necessity of home conditions the period of school life must necessarily end at a much earlier age than in others. I would recommend that as soon as possible kindergarten schools be established in the Cooper, Armourdale, and Morse Schools." Report by Supt. M. E. Pearson

***District Records:***

1903: For many days the daily papers were filled with accounts of the high water. Board member Bowles and Superintendent Pearson hired a boat and went to the Armourdale School. They rowed in the front door and down the hall and out the south door. At the Morse School, the current was too swift for the boat to get close. Wood was the third school to be inundated. They feared the three buildings would have to be replaced, but Wood was the only one condemned. Earlier it had been declared unfit for use and a new building recommended for the following year. By July, Armourdale and Morse were being repaired. Bruce, the colored school in the Wood district, also could be restored.

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1906-07: Armourdale School – 5<sup>th</sup> & Shawnee - There was a street car line on Shawnee Avenue then. One evening after school hours a little boy in the second grade was run over by a street car. Mr. Pearson helped get him out from under the car and the child died in his arms. The boy's name was Carlson; he was John Carlson's brother. John Carlson did not know who took his brother out from under the car wheels until after he was on the school board when Mr. Pearson related the incident. (Mr. Carlson was Board President in 1923).

1916 – Central Junior High School:

Kansas City , Kansas has a unique position in the educational system of Kansas, beginning with the school built and opened on July 1, 1844 by the Wyandot Tribal Council, located on what is now 4th Street between State and Nebraska.

“The Wyandots formed the first local government, school system, legal system, economic base, religious foundation and left much of their culture in the fabric of our early society.” (Loren Taylor, President, Wyandotte County Historical Society)

Central Middle School is no exception to “uniqueness.” Located at 10th & Ivandale, it emerged from a dream of M. E. Pearson, Superintendent of Schools. It was an experiment and would be the first junior high west of the Missouri River.

Mr. Pearson had been in the KCKs school system since 1886, serving at Wood, Long and Longfellow Schools, and was instrumental in establishing Kindergarten in the KCKs school system. He said Kansas City was an industrial city and many of its young people went into industry, not into a profession. His dream was an industrial high school. When Pearson studied the setup of the new intermediate schools, known as junior high schools, he felt he had found the solution to the problem of holding children in school until at least the ninth grade.

1924: Changes in school personnel were made. M. E. Pearson found that without assistance his office was getting burdensome. The board, on his recommendation, elected F. L. Schlagle, Argentine principal, assistant superintendent. J. F. Wellemeier, seven years principal of a high school at Quincy, Illinois, succeeded Mr. Rice as the high school unofficially designated now as Central. Former Cottey College president, J. C. Harmon, came from Nevada, Missouri, to be principal of Argentine. Lewis Brotherson was named Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds to succeed Lawrence L. Brown. Sherman D. Scruggs from Stowe was elected supervisor of the colored schools.

1927: The Kansas City, Kansas Teachers Training School came to an end in June, 1927, at least under the name it had borne for a long time. Rules were formulated for the organization and control of a school to be known as Teachers College. On the faculty M E Pearson, F L Schlagle, Russell L Wise, Bessie Miller, Emily Hall, Lillian Bohl, and Lucy McCoy, Director.

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The Department of Education in Junior College was designated as identical to the function of Teachers College, which trained teachers for service in the elementary schools and added to the advancement of teachers already in service. The state university and teachers colleges cooperated by forming extension classes. Requirements in the new school remained the same as in the old - two years of college work and one year of cadeting and substituting.

Requirements:

First Year:

Graduation from a Kansas City, Kansas high school  
Residence in Kansas City, Kansas  
Sound health and no physical defects  
Above average scholarship for the last three years of high school  
Approval of the principal of the high school from which graduated

Second and third years:

No grade below C for first year

1932: On Monday, January 18, the teachers of the city were called to a meeting at Wyandotte High School (Kansas City High School - 9th & Minnesota). When Superintendent Pearson announced that he had unpleasant news, everyone assumed it concerned salaries. Instead he tossed what the newspaper the following day called a "verbal bombshell".

"I am getting tired, as any old man will," he told the assembly. "There is to be a change in our relationship."

He went on to explain how inaccuracies came with age and that he preferred not to burden the system. He was turning his responsibilities as superintendent over to his assistant of the past eight years, Frank Leslie Schlagle, and asked for his successor the loyalty which had been given him.

During the following days, the *Star* and the *Kansan* reviewed the life of this man who had spent 46 years in the Kansas City schools. Matthew Edgar Pearson was born in Plainville, Indiana, on March 8, 1862. When he was ten years old the family settled in Leavenworth County, but moved two years later to Douglas County.

Lacking a high school diploma, the young man entered Kansas University and finished his prepatory work. He bought one horse and his father gave him another. For five years he raised wheat on a forty-acre farm, letting the horses earn their way by working on another farm during the winter. Serving as a janitor at a Quaker church, young Pearson was given a room for lodging. By 1885 he had earned a degree and was ready to teach. He married Miss Carrie.

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Mr. Pearson began his last round of visits to the school in February. Younger administrators sought his advice when he came to their schools where he spent a half hour in each room. On February 10, the Hawthorne PTA held a reception at the Western Highlands Presbyterian Church. Two hundred fifty people attended. Instead of retiring to a life of rest and travel as he had announced he would do, Mr. Pearson continued as a teacher of education and psychology at Junior College.

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**MATTHEW E. PEARSON (1862-1948)**

A tribute to my Grandfather by Dr. Vernon L. Dixon of Spokane, Washington  
(date unknown - probably after 1948)

- Superintendent of KCKs Schools thirty years (1902-1932). He visited every classroom annually often drawing pictures for the students and listening to them recite.
- Served the School System 53 years from age 24 to 77, as teacher, principal, art supervisor, superintendent and college professor.
- Author of the Pearson "Kansas Speller" used by grades 1-8 throughout the State.
- President of the Wyandotte County Red Cross.
- President of the Wyandotte Boy Scouts. President of the Kaw Council of Boy Scouts (11 counties).
- Recipient of Scoutings highest award, the Silver Beaver.
- President of City Council of Social Agencies.
- President of the Club Presidents Roundtable.
- President and founder of the Kansas City Parent Teachers Association.
- Vice-President of the National Teachers Assoc and State Director 18 years.
- Delegate to National Federation of the NEA.
- Charter member and National Director of Camp Fire Girls and Board member 18 years.
- Listed in "Who is Who in America."
- Board Member of YMCA.
- Board Director of Bethany Hospital 30 years.
- Founder of KC Schools Music Week.
- Called the "Garibaldi" of Kansas Teachers Assoc. A past president, served on Board of Directors 20 years and a life member 50 years.
- K U graduate with a Masters Degree from Baker University. Paid tuition by framing and living in the attic of a church as its janitor. Passed the teachers entrance examination with the unsurpassed grade of 99 and a fraction.
- A lecturer, writer and Church leader, Sunday School Superintendent and Men's Bible teacher (Washington Avenue Methodist Church). Earlier the London Heights Methodist Church began in his home.
- Some of the innovations established were:
  - night school

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- junior college
- summer vacation school
- kindergarten
- junior high system
- sewing and cooking classes for girls
- gymnasiums
- school of nursing (during World War I)
- Termed the most prominent educator of the mid-west. Called "Mr. Kansas City" and a Kansas institution.
- A son of Enoch S. Pearson whose ancestors came to America with William Penn and Edith Stanley, who people furnished a governor of Kansas and Missouri.
- The husband of Caroline Davis in whose honor the Carrie Davis Scholarship for needy children was established after her death in 1924. Her people founded the Friends University at Wichita.
- A father of two sons and three daughters. One son died, aged 5 years.
- A rose gardener, Rotatian, Humanitarian, Philosopher and Philanthropist.
- A birth-right Friend (Quaker) and is buried in the old Friends Church yard at Hesper, Kansas. He was a friend of Presidents, Vice-President and man dignitaries of his time. Etc., etc., etc.

But most of all - he was a FRIEND OF CHILDREN.

Matt Pearson's taking care  
Of little one Up There,  
Twas his reward.  
A truth, a child, a task  
Was all he ever asked  
Of the Lord.

With teacher friends so vast  
And millions in each class,  
No sound of bell,  
To call each child by name  
And join in all their games,  
Makes heaven well.

He's drawn on every wall  
A picture for them all -  
Of this I'm sure.  
They're learning art is fun  
They're scholars every one,  
In truth that's pure.

He's teaching Kansas verse,  
And songs that they rehearse  
We'll hear, some year,  
When we drop by his class

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To get our child at last  
And dry our tears.

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***A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans***, written & compiled by William E. Connelley, 1918, transcribed by Natalie Maples, student from USD 508, Baxter Springs Middle School, Baxter Springs, Kansas, February 25, 2000.

MATTHEW EDGAR PEARSON is serving his fifteenth consecutive year as superintendent of the public schools of Kansas City, Kansas. He began his work in the schools of this city thirty years ago, and no one individual has so intimate a knowledge of the actual growth and development of the local school system and has done more to improve its efficiency than the Pearsons. He is one of the best known and oldest educators in the State of Kansas.

Mr. Pearson was born at Plainsfield in Hendricks County, Indiana, March 8, 1862, but has lived in Kansas since he was ten years of age. He was the second in a family of six children. His parents were Enoch S. and Edith (Stanley) Pearson, the former a native of Ohio and the latter of Indiana. Enoch Pearson spent his life as a farmer. He was a Quaker and his family were of the strictest of that sect, having come to America with the William Penn Colony and they practiced the Quaker principle so faithfully that few if any of the name ever served in any of the wars of the nation. Enoch Pearson attended that fine old Quaker school of the middle West, Earlham College, at Richmond, Indiana.

In 1872 he brought his family to Kansas. He came to this state largely to give his sons better and broader opportunities. The family traveled by railroad to Leavenworth and located first in Leavenworth County, where the father rented land for two years. He then bought a farm of 160 acres near Eudora in Douglas County and broke a large part of the virgin prairie. He was a successful farmer, but had no special ambition to become a large land holder. He was content with a modest acreage, with a good home, and gave all the surplus to the benefit of his children. He sent all his six children to school and took special pride in furnishing them with the best of advantages procurable. Naturally such a man is an asset to any community, and he proved his influence in many beneficial ways while living in his county district in Douglas County. He was looked upon as a man of exceptional wisdom and his advice was frequently sought by his neighbors. The utmost of confidence was reposed in his integrity and good citizenship. He was a republican, but official office holding had no part in his record. He was a staunch supporter of church and morality, lived forty years as an elder, while his wife was the Sunday school teacher for forty-three years. Enoch Pearson died at Kansas City Kansas in May, 1916. His children were: Martha, now Mrs. M. C. Hill of Hesper, Kansas; Matthew E.; Dr. W. J. of Kansas City; Curtis, who died when about thirty-four years of age; H. I. of Kansas City, Kansas; and Mary, wife of George Henry of Kansas City, Kansas.

Matthew E. Pearson received his only education in the common schools of Indiana and Leavenworth, Kansas. After getting the advantages supplied by the public schools he felt that he had received all that he could ask from his father and rather than burden him with

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the expense of his college education determined to pay his own way through the University of Kansas. He did this by renting a farm and devoting each summer season to cropping, while the winter terms were spent in university. As a result of this he was graduated with his bachelor degree from the University of Kansas in 1885, and had not only his education but \$100 in cash along with his diploma. The profession of an educator is what appealed to him most strongly, and the year following his graduation from university he taught in Wallua in Wyandotte County. In 1886 he came to Kansas City, Kansas, and was one of the force of fifty-six teachers who at that time did the work of the various municipalities now comprised within Kansas City, Kansas. He was for five years principal of the Wood School, now known as the Cooper School. He then became principal of the Armourdale School, now the John J. Ingalls School, remained there three years and then went to the Long School, now known as the Longfellow School. He was principal at Longfellow School eight years, and in 1902 was elected by the school board as superintendent of the city school system. As superintendent he has under his supervision forty-four distinct schools and a staff of 430 teachers.

Mr. Pearson by no means considered his possibilities of learning and accomplishment finished when he left university. He has always been a student, and has mastered many branches of knowledge and extended his acquaintance with life at various points. While principal of the Longfellow School he was also supervisor of drawing and art work in all the city schools. He has been alert to take advantage of the improvement of methods in the education and training of children, and he is conscious of many changes and has been instrumental in improving method during the fifteen years he has been superintendent. He is justly proud of the splendid school system now possessed by Kansas City. In 1907 Baker University conferred upon him the honorary degree Master of Arts.

Mr. Pearson is a member of the National Council of Education, an honorary body of the National Education Association, of which he is also a member. He is a member of the board of directors of the Kansas State Teachers' Association, and was president in 1913. He also belongs to the National Association of English Teachers and to other educational organizations. In politics he is a republican but independent in local matters, is affiliated with the Modern Woodmen of America and the Ancient Order of United Workmen, and both he and his wife are active in the Washington Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. They were formerly connected with the London Heights Church, where Mr. Pearson was superintendent of the Sunday school for a number of years. He is also a member of the Mercantile Association and has served on some of its committees.

Mr. Pearson was married December 31, 1885, to Carrie Davis of Lawrence, daughter of Nathan and Sarah (White) Davis. Nathan Davis was a farmer and died when Mrs. Pearson was a young girl. Mr. and Mrs. Pearson have five children: DeWitt, who is now teaching school in Salt Lake City; Russell, who died at the age of three years; Claudia, a student in Bethany College; Myrle, who is in high school; and Dorothea.

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Picture: M. E. Pearson, Principal of Long School, 2329 No. 6<sup>th</sup> Street, 1894-1904

Mr. Pearson  
was also  
principal of  
Longfellow,  
Cooper and  
Wood  
Schools.

