

The “Gold Standard” of Education

*A family devoted to teaching were
important local trailblazers*

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Michener Dude Ranch cabin sits proudly on the school campus in Big Sky

It is fitting that a Michener Dude Ranch cabin sits proudly on the school campus in Big Sky, honoring the Michener’s’ hard work to educate the children here during the first two decades of the 1900s.



“Mamie,” valued education

Sometimes mistaken as the first school in Big Sky, the cabin was moved onto the campus in the late 1990s, as a school-wide place-based project. Under the direction of then superintendent Pat Ingraham and middle school teacher Joan Traylor, the joint community/school project salvaged one of the Michener cabins headed for sale or disposal to make way for the gravel pit.

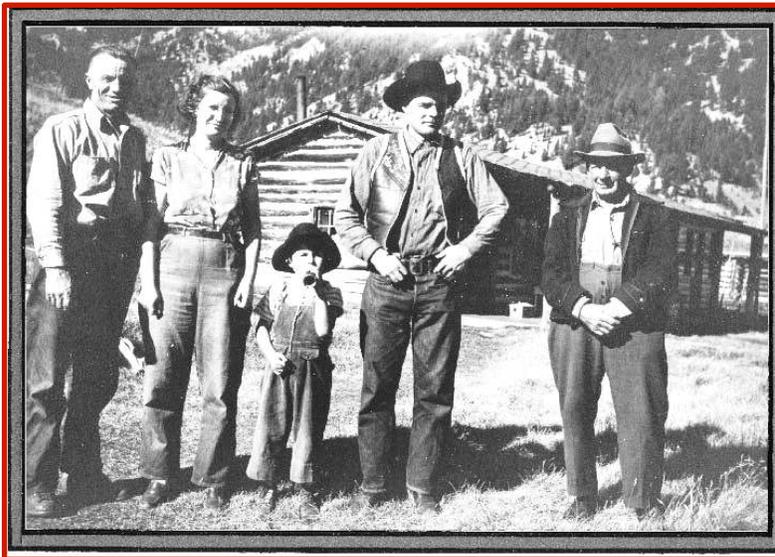
Tom Michener arrived in the Gallatin Canyon in the late 1800s. At the time there were few ranchers and even fewer children. Michener and his wife Mary, known as

***School desk from original Ophir School –
On display at Crail Ranch 2010***

above most things.

In 1908, he helped to start a summer-only school for the handful of children living here. School was held in a cabin owned by Pearl Lockhart Lytle, his sister-in-law. He hired his distant cousin, Kate Cope, to teach that summer and gave her room and board.

After that summer, Michener worked hard to rally his neighbors to institute a school district. The state's recognition of the district became official on December 18, 1912, at the first school board meeting. The Ophir School District was named for the biblical reference in 1 Kings 10 to Solomon's gold mines. Although prospectors had not found much gold in these mountains, they believed they had, metaphorically, found gold when they established a school district.



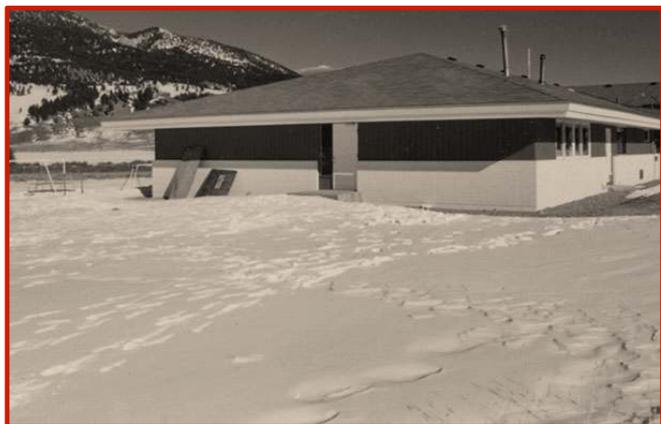
From left, Joe and Dorothy Vick, Ed Smith (B-K manager) and his son, and Emmett Crail

Michener presided as school board chair for several years. In 1914, the board again hired Kate Cope as the teacher for four students, three of whom were Michener children. The four-month contract paid \$280.

Ora Michener Lemon, a Michener daughter who was taught by Cope in 1914, returned to the schoolhouse as the teacher in 1923 under a three-month contract that paid \$100 a month.

Emmett Crail was on the school board for 10 years and served as the chair during the 1920s, when his brother Eugene built the first schoolhouse, a log structure that was decommissioned in 1964 when the new building was erected on the current campus location.

By the late 50s, the log schoolhouse built by Eugene Crail in 1929, had become difficult to maintain. Enter Dorothy Vick, another Michener daughter. Vick successfully lobbied the board to build a new, modern facility. Some funding came from the estate of Dr. Caroline McGill, former 320 Ranch owner. McGill donated the money to the Gallatin Canyon Women's Club, stipulating that they use it for a community project. Through Vick's persuasive efforts, the GCWC voted in 1961 to dedicate the funds to a new school. After voter approval of project bonding, the school was built and opened in 1964. That original structure remains the inner core of the current



1964 School Building is now the Core of the Big Sky School campus

district building.

Until the 1970s, when the resort was opened, the Gallatin Canyon was more populated than the Meadow. Canyon folk championed education. In the 1920s, under a county threat to disband the district because it lacked a schoolhouse, voters approved construction of the log building built by Crail and located across 191 from the current school. Still, “school” was often moved off-campus, depending on where the majority of students lived. In 1931, school was at the Benhams. With Sara and Jack Durnam the only students in 1943, school was held at Karst Kamp.

In both 1924 and 1933, the lack of students forced one-year closures of the school district. The Ophir Board minutes state, “It is not the desire to have school disbanded for two consecutive terms as this allows for the disbanding of the School District.” The dedication of Canyon residents kept the district alive throughout the first half of the 20th century. The threat of consolidation and closure still looms today across Montana, but Big Sky’s K-12 district has survived and expanded with over 300 students now.

Poised above Route 191, the Michener cabin is testimony to the family’s dedication to education. This little piece of Big Sky history continues to serve as a teaching tool for Big Sky’s children and reminds Big Sky of the importance of our unique educational system.