

A piece of Dixon history: The story behind A. C. Bowers Field



COMMUNITY VOICES

Tom Wadsworth

On a crisp Friday night, October 18, 1964, the Dixon Dukes were battling the Kewanee Boilermakers on Dixon's "Athletic Field," as it was known at that time.

Up in the stands, Arthur Cleveland (A. C.) Bowers and his wife, Lineta, were keeping warm in their regular seats. Although Bowers had just retired in 1963 as the school's athletic director, he and Lineta continued to attend Dixon's games as part of their regular routine.

At halftime, Bowers was surprised when the Dixon High School Band struck up the loyalty song of Yankton College of Yankton, South Dakota, the alma mater of both A. C. and Lineta. As the music played, former Dixon Mayor J. Fred Hofmann came into the stands and escorted the retired couple to the grass of the football field.

In a presentation under the lights, emcee Dean Harrison

announced that the Dixon school board had passed a

resolution honoring Bowers as "an example of a man who put service above self." The resolution noted his 42 years as athletic director, "during which years he won the timeless friendship of all Dixon High School students and admiration of her athletic opponents both on and off the field of competition.

"Therefore, be it resolved that as of this date, the Dixon High School Athletic Field shall be named Arthur C. Bowers Field in honor and appreciation of your devotion and loyalty to Dixon High School."

Covering the dedication, the Telegraph noted the "wild acclaim" that arose from fans in the grandstand. "This is about as much as mortal man can do to immortalize the memory of a man."

Deserving the great honor

The seeds of that high honor were planted in 1921 when Bowers landed his first job out of Yankton College.



A.C. Bowers in 1959



Photos provided by Tom Wadsworth

When former Dixon High School student and football player Ronald Reagan (from left) returned to Dixon in 1950, he met with B. J. Frazer and coach A. C. Bowers.

He was named the Dixon High School athletic director, science teacher and coach for track, football and basketball, serving Dixon's 470 students at its North Side high school at Brinton Avenue and McKenney Street and South Side high school at Fifth Street and Hennepin Avenue.

Bowers became the first coach to utilize the Dixon school board's new athletic field, a 7-acre plot bought in 1920 along the Rock River, where it is today. The acreage was mostly undeveloped and the site of occasional grass fires, but before 1906 it had been known as Pleasure Park, a place for horse races and athletic/community events.

Every day starting in 1921, the young A. C. Bowers had high school athletes jog from their respective schools to "the Athletic Field" for

practices, football games and track meets.

A notable player

One wannabe football player in 1924 was a 13-year-old, 108-pound freshman named Ronald Reagan. A fanatical sports fan, Reagan badly wanted to make the team. After all, his big brother, Neil, was a junior and a starting end.

But Ronald was so small, Bowers had to find special pants to fit him. Bowers let Reagan practice, but because of his size, the kid didn't make the team. But by 1926, Reagan had beefed up to 160 pounds. Bowers then started the eager Reagan at right guard, a position he fiercely held until he graduated in 1928.

In 1928, the Dixon School Board decided to merge the north side and

south side high schools, and build one high school to serve the entire city. Of five possible sites, citizens voted for "the Athletic Field" as the location for the new school.

After months of construction, the beautiful castle-like edifice along the river opened for the fall semester of 1929. Bowers was the first athletic director and coach to utilize the new athletic equipment and gymnasium, now called "the Old Gym."

Gaining a reputation

Over the years, Bowers' fame and popularity grew. The 1926 yearbook said he had achieved renown for standing by his players as a coach, friend and companion. The 1941 DHS yearbook hailed him as the "best gym

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teacher in the state.” The 1959 senior class dedicated the yearbook to him, praising him for his “thorough instruction, “pleasing personality” and for having “a wonderful influence on his students.”

Finally, in 1963 A. C. Bowers retired at age 69 after 42 years in Dixon schools. Over the years, he had seen enrollment more than double, as a flood of Baby Boomers filled the halls of DHS. By 1964, a thankful school board was more than ready to immortalize “the Athletic Field” as “A. C. Bowers Field.”

In June 1975, 81-year-old A. C. Bowers died and was buried at Oakwood Cemetery. Just six months later, his former student from 1924 to 28 would announce his candidacy for president of the United States. On Dec. 17, 1975, the Telegraph interviewed candidate Ronald Reagan and asked him to name someone in Dixon who had a profound influence on him.

You guessed it. Reagan, the 64-year-old presidential candidate, said that he owed “a great deal” to A. C. Bowers.

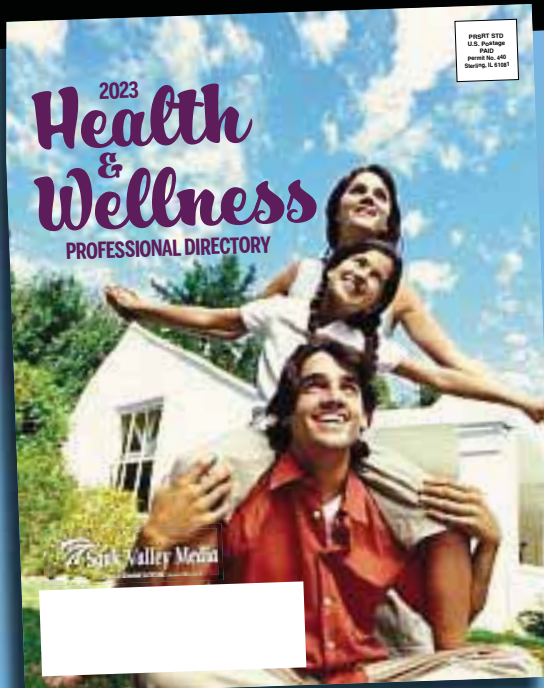
• Tom Wadsworth is a Dixon resident and an independent scholar.



Alex T. Paschal file

Dixon High School first opened in 1929 after north and south campuses were combined.

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