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Shamokin-Coal Twp. union inevitable

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If the state had its druthers, Coal Township and Shamokin could have been principal partners in a school jointure at least 10 years before the actual mandated merger happened in 1965.

A county school reorganization plan approved in 1953, an updated plan in 1960 and the final plan in 1964 all called for a Coal Township-Shamokin combination. The plan always included additional outlying townships, with the specific townships varying from time to time; but the Coal Township-Shamokin merger was always a constant.

The 1940s and 1950s heralded the era of non-mandated, but state-encouraged, school jointures. These jointures were arrangements, approved by county school boards and the state Department of Public Instruction, in which two or more school districts formed joint boards to supervise the operation of those schools which their students mutually attended.

Until the statewide school reorganization law mandated the creation of the Shamokin Area School District, which took effect July 1, 1965, Coal Township, owing to its size, was able to “go it alone,” the only district in Northumberland County to do so.

East Cameron, Shamokin townships

Although Coal Township was mentioned at various times in the 1950s and 1960s as a possible participant for various school alignments, whether proposed by the Northumberland County School Board or a neighboring district, it had never been party to a jointure.

Shamokin City School Board, however, was long involved in key interdistrict partnerships (tuition-paying arrangements or joint operating agreements) with East Cameron Township and Shamokin Township. Both of these municipalities eventually became part of the Shamokin Area merger. East Cameron was a willing participant since 1950. Shamokin Township’s relationship with Shamokin School District, however, wasn’t always etched in stone; officials from that township were known to explore other options for a permanent alliance.

In April 1950, Shamokin School Board ratified an agreement to organize a joint school board with East Cameron and Shamokin townships, which, at the time, had jurisdiction only over the high school. The rural districts continued to operate their own elementary schools. The joint board included seven representatives from Shamokin and one each from Shamokin and East Cameron townships. The initial jointure agreement with East Cameron was eventually expanded to include all elementary and secondary pupils.

Accounts in the Shamokin News-Dispatch hint at a cool down in the relationship between Shamokin City and Shamokin Township school districts in the mid-1950s. Shamokin Township, which previously sent some elementary students to the Stevens Elementary School in Shamokin on a tuition basis, decided instead to operate its own classrooms by utilizing space in Coal Township’s Uniontown School. Around the same time, Shamokin Township actually withdrew from the Shamokin jointure.

Join with Trevorton?

Shamokin Township figured prominently in 1957 in an aborted plan to form a Trevorton Area jointure, along with the Zerbe, Little Mahanoy and West Cameron districts. Shamokin Township residents expressed opposition to the plan in a non-binding referendum. In the same election, Shamokin Township voters reportedly favored school director candidates who favored a Shamokin-Shamokin Township alliance. Ultimately, the proposed realignment was rejected by the state because the size of the proposed district was considered too small. Shamokin Township was again added to the Shamokin School Jointure through articles of agreement approved in February 1958, although there had been some sentiment in the township to sending students to Sunbury instead.

Tough to stand alone

Shamokin City School District was largely supportive of efforts by the Northumberland County School Board and Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction to facilitate regional discussion about school reorganization efforts. Shamokin invited school officials from Coal, Shamokin, East Cameron, West Cameron, Little Mahanoy and Zerbe townships to a meeting in early 1958 to talk about reorganization. All were then listed as members of Unit 6, a proposed school alignment. Roy Cleaver of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction praised Shamokin’s superintendent, Dr. Clifford V. Jones, for his efforts in trying to bring the various school systems together.

The News-Dispatch’s account of the meeting reported that John H. Carter, assistant county superintendent of schools, commented there that, “There is no legislation forcing these issues, but efforts definitely are being made to make standing alone increasingly difficult for smaller districts that are not well off financially.”

The name

In December 1964, a nine-member operating committee was formed to plan the Shamokin-Coal Township school merger. All seemed to go fairly smoothly, except for a dispute over what to call the new district.

Initially, the committee listed “Shamokin-Coal Township” School District as its first choice, by a 5-4 vote, with “Shamokin Area School District” as an alternative name. The Department of Public Instruction subsequently requested that the district submit only one name, and the issue came to a head in March with a 6-3 approval by the committee for “Shamokin Area.” The controversy resulted in about 600 Coal Township High School students conducting a protest walk through the business district and in front of Shamokin High School.

The “name issue” didn’t delay merger progress. In what was viewed as an important compromise, Coal Township’s school colors, purple and white, were eventually adopted for Shamokin Area.

Final board meetings for the old district were held — Shamokin’s on Sept. 28, 1965, Coal Township’s on Sept. 30. The new school district, which began with more than 4,200 students, was born July 1, 1965, one year in advance of the state-mandated date.

