

# Open Air School Farewell

DECEMBER 9, 2024 *By* Doug *in* DEMOLITION, LOST BUILDINGS, MT. TABOR, OBSERVED *Tags:* A.L. MILLS OPEN AIR SCHOOL, MT. TABOR, MT. TABOR NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION, OPEN AIR, PORTLAND HOUSING BUREAU  
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Last weekend marked the final public tour (<https://alamedahistory.org/2024/11/28/one-last-look-at-open-air-school/>) of the A.L. Mills Open Air School at the southwest corner of SE 60<sup>th</sup> and Stark in the Mt. Tabor neighborhood.



([https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/img\\_3035.jpeg](https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/img_3035.jpeg)).

*The empty long hallway at Open Air School, December 2024. The building has been empty since 2019.*

The former school building, built in 1918-1919, will soon be deconstructed by the Portland Housing Bureau (PHB) to make way for an affordable housing development. For the last six weeks, we've been working with the Bureau and the Mt. Tabor Neighborhood Association to share stories of the building with neighbors and anyone interested in having a last look.

Some came because they've watched the old school's recent decline, seen the graffiti and cyclone fence sprout and wondered what was inside. Others came because they've had connections to one of the four chapters of its earlier life. Everyone wanted to know what would come next.

### **A.L. Mills Open Air School first of its kind**

When it opened in 1919, the Abbott L. Mills Open Air School put Portland on the map nationally and internationally as the nation's first entirely purpose-built open-air school, meaning that students and teachers spent their entire school day surrounded by fresh air. A handful of other communities across the country had experimented with a classroom here or there in an *existing* school. In Portland, the original Irvington School featured one open air classroom where the windows were open all day, all school year.

But with financial help and encouragement from the Oregon Tuberculosis Association, Portland Public Schools was able to build an entire school dedicated to helping "low vitality children" improve their health and therefore their resiliency to tuberculosis, which was a serious health threat of that era killing hundreds of thousands of people of all ages in the U.S. during the 1920s.

## AT PORTLAND'S OPEN AIR SCHOOL



Children who attend the A. L. Mills Open Air school enjoy work and play, study, sleep and nourishing food in a way that makes them the happy, healthy children that their smiles indicate. Above, left to right—Marie Curtis, James Given, Hattie Weinsolt, Gilbert Wellington, Margaret Moss. Center, left to right—Jack Port, Edwin Souther. Below, left to right—Sylvester Cryness, Jack Barnett, Helen Knoff, all pupils at the A. L. Mills Open Air school on East Sixtieth street.

(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/11-30-1919-oregon-journal.png>).

*From the Oregon Journal, November 30, 1919*

The Oregon Tuberculosis Association was led by Abbot L. Mills, former Oregon Speaker of the House, philanthropist, president of the First National Bank of Portland, and chief organizer of the Portland Open Air Sanatorium for Consumptives. Mills, who earlier served as vice president of the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, was a tireless public health advocate around tuberculosis, and the chief push on funding for the school, so it's entirely appropriate the building bears his name.

The open-air movement was an international public health philosophy based on the notion that being exposed to fresh, circulating air kept children, and people of all ages, healthier.

### **60th and Stark: Epicenter of Mt. Tabor community and Portland's health spas**

That's why school and health officials selected the western slopes of Mt. Tabor, then a rural and bucolic elevated place distant from the churn of downtown Portland (Mt. Tabor was annexed into Portland in 1905). In 1902, the Portland Sanitarium opened just a block away at 60<sup>th</sup> and Belmont (site of the former Adventist Hospital). Another private sanitarium operated at 60<sup>th</sup> and Yamhill.

60<sup>th</sup> and Stark was also the crossroads and heart of the Mt. Tabor community. From 1880 until 1911 a former school operated on the site. Before that, a frontier school operated out of a log building in the same place.



(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/org-lot-982-mt-tabor-school-b8-f6.jpg>).

Looking south on 60th at the corner with Stark (then known as Baseline Road), about 1907, four years before this school burned, clearing the site that has hosted the Open Air School since 1918. Drying cordwood is stacked for the furnace in the old school. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, image Org-Lot-982, Box 8 Folder 6.

The two-room A.L. Mills Open Air School opened on January 27, 1919 with its full capacity of 50 students ages 5-15, two teachers and care team.



(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/north-elevation-gifford-photo.png>).

The Stark Street side of Open Air. Photograph Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, from the Ben Gifford Collection Box 8, Folder 5. Gifford photographed the school not long after its opening on January 27, 1919.

Miss Anna Thompson was principal of "Open Air," its often-used nickname, and she never missed an opportunity to let everyone know her students were *not* tuberculous: they were children with health infirmities that made them vulnerable to TB.

Here's an essay by Principal Thompson that appeared in *The Oregonian* on May 14, 1925:

*"Because of the ardent interest and material support given by the Oregon Tuberculosis Association in the early history of the school, many people believe 'Open Air' to be a school for tuberculous children. This is a very grave mistake. Children who are tuberculous or infections from any cause whatsoever are not admitted. I want this fact impressed on parents and others. We are trying to prevent these children from growing into defective conditions—the purpose is preventative not remedial."*

Got that? Not a place for sick children: Miss Thompson and her colleagues were trying to *keep them* from getting sick.



(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/courtyard.png>)

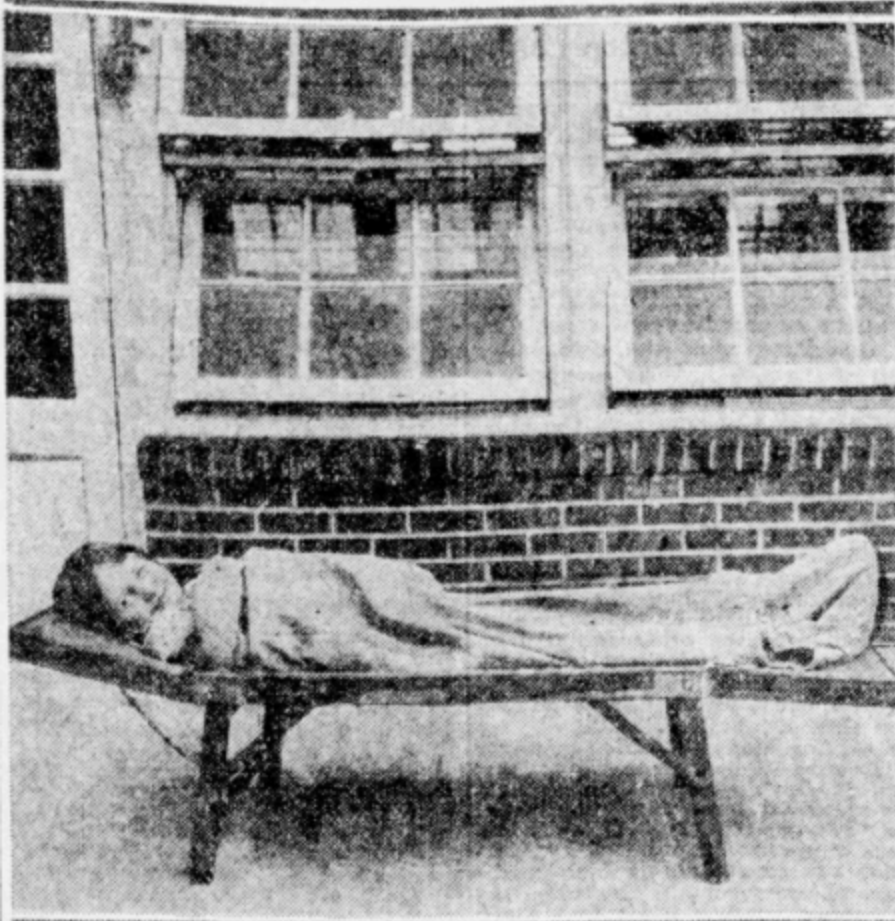
*Afternoon nap time at Open Air. Photograph Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, from the Ben Gifford Collection Box 8, Folder 5.*

Staff at Open Air included Principal Thompson, who also taught in one of the two rooms; a physician who was on site every Wednesday to examine each child; a full-time nurse; a matron who helped with showers, hygiene and meals; and a second teacher. The nurse visited each student's home multiple times to make a plan with parents about how to work together and to keep tabs on progress.

There were places for 50 students, drawn from all walks of life across the city. Their families applied and the children had to be examined by the doctor and nurse to be admitted, and to stay enrolled. Students could stay up to three terms to rebuild their weight and improve their health before going back to their neighborhood schools, so the composition of the student body shifted each term.

# CITY SCHOOL SKETCHBOOK

One of a Series of Features Showing Varied Training Received by Portland Pupils in Elementary and Secondary Curricula.



Frail children of Portland schools are admitted to Mills Open Air school, where special equipment makes possible individual attention. The picture shows Ruth Kellogg on her cot during the afternoon rest period.

THE positive health program of the Portland schools is carried on intensively at Mills Open Air school, where frail children are admitted for as long as three terms. An addition recently made gives the building sufficient capacity for 75 children. Three teachers conduct the class work and the health work of the school.

When Mills Open Air school was organized the Portland schools had none of their present health program, which includes the service of doctors and nurses for all the schools as well as dental care. There still is a place for the open air school, however, since the pupils sent there are in need of individual care to a greater extent than teachers of large classes can give. The building is especially equipped for necessary physical care. It has its own scales and weight charts, its shower baths and equipment for keeping hands and mouths well cleansed. A kitchen and dining room are provided, and simple, hot lunches are served at noon, in addition to mugs of milk in the mid-morning.

The building is equipped for use as a health school. Its class rooms are

ventilated. There are folding cots for the afternoon rest period, which slip into convenient compartments along one side of the room. During warm weather the children may take their cots into the open play court of the building, but in cold weather they set up their cots in the class room.

Frail children from any Portland school may be transferred to the open air school for a period not exceeding three months. The primary object of the school is not school advancement but health improvement, although many children make excellent progress without injury to their health. The school doctor and health nurses arrange a home program for the children which correlates with the program followed at school.

As Mills Open Air school is the only school of its kind in the city, many types of physically sub-normal children are enrolled. Malnourished children, nervous children, heart cases and many children recovering from the after-effects of severe illness are entered. No tubercular children are admitted.

Funds for Portland's health school are provided by school district No. 1 and there is no additional cost to pupils attending. The milk, luncheon and

may be entirely open during favorable weather. During the winter the needed equipment are furnished by the school, of which Anna Thompson is principal.

([https://alamedahistory.org/wp-](https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2-10-1931-oregon-journal.png)

[content/uploads/2024/12/2-10-1931-oregon-journal.png](https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2-10-1931-oregon-journal.png))

*From The Oregonian, February 10, 1931.*

In the 1920 school year, 77 total students were in attendance, which means 27 of them were “restored to health” and transferred back to their neighborhood schools, allowing other children to be admitted. *The Oregonian* in 1920 reported that at one point 15 of the 50 children were “only children,” who theoretically had the undivided attention of their parents—no siblings—a point that Principal Thompson liked to make, perhaps to bolster the fact that unhealthiness was not necessarily related to a lack of resources or attention.

A great description of a day in the life of Open Air ran in *The Oregonian* on December 10, 1922:

*“Shower baths are the first order of the day at 8:00 and during this period once a week the pupils are weighed and inspected for symptoms of physical defects. After baths the pupils put on their sitting robes of heavy blanket material and enter the open window classrooms where they attend their studies until 10:25 at which time half a pint of milk is served in the lunch room to each pupil. This is followed by a period of supervised recreation. When the weather permits games are played on the court or lawn.*

*“The entire noon hour is given up in preparation for lunch, eating lunch, and preparation for rest. Getting ready for lunch requires washing face and hands, cleaning fingernails, combing hair.*

*“A copy of the menu of hot dishes for the following week’s lunches is sent home each Friday, so that the mothers will know how to supplement them with the right kind of sandwiches and other foods. For the past week, the menu has been: Monday, hot milk toast; Tuesday, apple tapioca; Wednesday, lamb stew with vegetables; Thursday, hot cocoa; Friday, hot rice”*

*“After the midday meal, the teeth are brushed and pupils returned to classroom where preparation for rest is made. Cots are spread with warm blankets and after a few vigorous breathing exercises, the rest period begins. At 2:00, the children rise from the cots, faces are washed and hair is combed and studies are resumed until 3:25 when milk is again served and the pupils are dismissed.”*



Pupils at Mills open-air school, one of the institutions in Portland which is rendering magnificent service and which transforms underweight children into lively, full-weight specimens. Note the satisfied smile on face of the youngster in the foreground.

(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/12-10-1922-the-oregonian.png>)

*From The Oregonian, December 10, 1922*

In cold weather, the children wore heavy robes (pictured above) which were called "Eskimaux suits," described like this in that same story:

*"The brownie coveralls with hood provided by the school to be worn on chilly days are like a fraternity emblem among the pupils and are decidedly popular as their insignia of privileged rank. Sleeping robes are also provided, made of canvas lined with gray woolen blankets that launder well."*

An observation of impact and results were noted in this story from *The Oregonian* on April 20, 1919, just a few months after the school opened:

# CHILDREN BECOME HEALTHY IN MILLS OPEN-AIR SCHOOL

Pupils Returned to Parents With Rosy Cheeks, Bright Eyes and Heavier Weight—Air and Nutritious Food Plentiful.

**"H**OW sick does a feller have to be to get into this here school?"

This was the somewhat astonishing question put to Miss Jane Allen, nurse at the A. L. Mills open air school, by an emaciated little fellow, soon after the school opened. He had heard of this very unusual school where rest and work, play and nourishing food are combined with fresh air in such a manner that "fellers" like him not only keep up with their classes, but are made healthful and strong and incidentally have lots of good times.

He was admitted and after six weeks in this health-giving institution he returned to his regular school with rosy cheeks, bright eyes and several extra pounds. He is one of the best boosters the school has, although the day he left he was heard to warn one of the children: "Don't drink too much of this milk or you'll get fat like me and have to leave this school."

## Defects Are Corrected.

Children who, on account of defective sight, bad teeth, adenoids, diseased tonsils or any of the many other things that children are heir to; children who by heredity are predisposed to disease; children who have not been properly nourished—these are the children from whom the open air school draws its 43 pupils, whose school grades vary from the first to the eighth, inclusive.

"Examination by specialists revealed the fact that eight of the 40 children first enrolled had defective sight. These have been corrected and there have also been several operations for adenoids and tonsils," said Miss Allen. "Then I found that many were not living as they should and that lack of proper food, insufficient sleep and little or no fresh air were responsible for their nervous, anæmic condition. I visited the homes in an effort to have these things corrected. One little fellow whom I felt sure was not eating right said he didn't eat 'nothin' much' for breakfast. I insisted on knowing just what he did eat and he said: 'O, just two cups of coffee and seven pancakes.' The children bring sandwiches from home and

these I find are made of cheese or pork and are frequently supplemented with pies and rich cakes, so I had a little missionary work to do there too. I can do wonders if I have the co-operation of the home, but if I haven't my efforts are in vain."

## Baths First on Programme.

The school, which is located on Sixtieth street in the Mount Tabor district, is a one-story building surrounding three sides of a court. Every possible inch of space is given to windows, for the fundamental ingredients of the treatment are fresh air and sunshine. The children arrive at 8:30 A. M. Shower baths are the first on the programme. After undressing quickly and slipping the rubber caps over their heads, they scramble for the shower, where they hop around like nymphs under the streams of water brought to the right temperature. If a cap goes askew and anyone's hair becomes wet, the electric blower is applied to do the drying. Each child buttons himself into the big woolly robe and hood provided and then begins the regular studies for the day.

## Windows Always Open.

The windows, which are always wide open, are so arranged that there is no direct draft. In the middle of the morning a short recess is taken, when the children are given a mug of milk; this is followed by a short play period outside, if the weather permits. Then there are more studies until noon, when the children have their lunches, supplemented either with hot chocolate or with a nourishing soup. In the service and in eating the children are instructed in courtesy and table manners. The toothbrush drill comes next, each child having her brush numbered and placed in a rack. Miss Allen stands at the end of the little trough, built especially for this work, to show the little ones how really to clean their teeth.

At 1 o'clock the desks and chairs in the school rooms are pushed back, cots are pulled out and the little ones climb into their sleeping bags. Until 2 o'clock there is silence, each child being required to close his eyes, inducing sleep. All rise an hour later ready for the last hour of study. At 3:22 each re-

ceives another mug of milk and is sent home.

The children are weighed and measured regularly and without a single exception there has been an increase in weight and improvement in the general health, except when a part of the treatment involved a tonsil, adenoid or other operation. Although the school has been in operation only a little more than two months, eight children have been discharged and returned to their regular school. Miss Anna Thompson and Miss Edna Hunt are the teachers and the lunchroom is in charge of Mrs. Ella Ferrar.

The A. L. Mills open air school, named in honor of A. L. Mills, president of the Oregon Tuberculosis association, with whom the idea of the school originated, is said by experts to be the last word in open air schools. Its plan was worked out by F. J. Naramore, the school architect; Mrs. Saidie Orr-Dunbar, executive secretary of the Oregon Tuberculosis association, and Miss Emma E. Grittinger, superintendent of the Visiting Nurse association.

(<https://alamedahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/oregonian-4-20-1919.png>)

*From The Oregonian, April 20, 1919*

## Repurposed to meet current needs

By the late 1940s, the baby boom of Portland's school-age children brought neighborhood schools to full capacity. With tuberculosis receding as a health threat and the need to make more space, the school board chose to close Open Air, sending students back to their neighborhood schools, and reconfiguring the building as Mt. Tabor Annex, the venue for all kindergarten and first-grade children from Mt. Tabor. A third classroom was built and the converted annex operated as a regular school until 1973.

When the population of school-age children receded, the building was surplused, ending up in the portfolio of Portland Parks and Recreation, where it was once again repurposed, operating from 1974-1990 as the Mt. Tabor Community Arts Program and Community Theater Workshop.

Budget cuts in the 1990s ended the community arts and theater programs and the building was fallow for several years and on track to be sold to a private school operator, which ended up not happening. In 1994, Parks and Recreation leased the building to the YMCA, which operated it as a daycare for 25 years, until 2019. Operating costs and deferred maintenance ended that chapter just as the pandemic descended, and the old school was once again surplused, eventually acquired by the Portland Housing Bureau. It's been vacant since as the Housing Bureau has considered its options.

### **What's Next**

On each of the recent tours, PHB Capital Projects Manager Kate Piper explained to neighbors that the bureau will soon be deconstructing the old school and salvaging as much of the building material as possible. Redevelopment plans are not yet clear on what happens after that, or when, but removing the existing building from the site is a high priority to manage liability and to set the stage for future development.

This fall's public tours of the building have helped resurrect and appreciate the stories of Open Air's past. This time traveler will be going away, but the site has always been a place of change and evolution, meeting the community's most pressing needs.

No one on the tours questioned the importance of housing, though most couldn't help but be moved by the stories that have played out there: of Principal Anna Thompson and her team, the children—each on their own pathway to vitality—and the will of a community investing hope and energy in its most vulnerable.

*With thanks to colleagues Paul Leistner, President of the Mt. Tabor Neighborhood Association; Kristen Minor, Architectural Historian who completed a detailed survey of the property; and Kate Piper at PHB for recognizing the importance of sharing the Open Air story and connecting with the neighborhood.*

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