

Off the Gridiron: New London first to flip on Friday night lights

tylerpaper.com/news/local/off-the-gridiron-new-london-first-to-flip-on-friday-night-lights/article_a3d66450-0340-5f9c-96b3-e7c69121e89d.html

By Dayna Worchel dworchel@tylerpaper.com

September 13, 2013



NEW LONDON — The young faces of the London High School at New London Wildcat football team stare out from the pages of the school's 1935 yearbook, holding the leather helmets worn in those days.

It's the tattered pages from that simple, fragile, yearbook that tell the story of one of the first, if not the first, high school football fields in East Texas that had lights installed.

"Until somebody else proves that we aren't the first, we say we are the first" to have lights on a football field, London Museum docent John Davidson said this past week.

Davidson, 73, graduated from London High School, as it was known then, in 1958. The high school is now a part of the West Rusk County Consolidated Independent School District, and its mascot is the Raiders.

ADVERTISING

The lights were added to the football field in 1934, Davidson said, but the first documentation of the night games came in the form of several photos and captions in that 1935 yearbook. One yearbook page shows a score of "London 37, Garrison 0" with a caption that read: "Sporting the only field in Rusk County equipped for night football, the London Wildcats clawed the Garrison boys to the tune of 37 to 0."

Two other photos show pictures of the London High School team on the football field at night. In one picture, the team is sitting on the sidelines with a caption that reads: "Future football heroes under London's lighted football field." In another photo that shows the team on the field, the caption read: "A night picture at the game between London and Arp."

The lights on the football field might have come as a result of the huge East Texas oil boom that came during the 1930s and 1940s, and the school district was known as the richest in the state, Davidson said. In 1937, the taxable property value in the district was \$20 million, according to information posted on the wall in the London Museum.

During those oil boom days, athletes used a whirlpool. A handball court was in the gym, everyone got a letter jacket, and each band instrument was furnished, according to information received from the museum. Ballplayers enjoyed chicken fried steak after away games, too.

The New London school district continued to thrive, even after the 1937 school gas explosion, until World War II. The East Texas oilfield began to decline, and some of the families who came in during the boom left, according to the museum.

The new West Rusk school district stadium was completed in 2012 at a cost of \$4.5 million with seating for 2,600 fans, Superintendent Tommy Alexander said.

And a sign there pays homage to its history. It says: "Home of the Original Friday Night Lights."