

Short-term citizen left mark on Tempe

There's a tendency among newcomers to refer to the street three blocks west of Mill Avenue in the old downtown Tempe area as Farmers Avenue.

But it's Farmer Avenue — singular — and the street's naming, like that of Rural Road, had nothing to do with Tempe's beginnings in the late 1800s as a rural agricultural community.

Farmer Avenue, like Rural Road (named for the old, long-vanished Rural School District), has a history based not on farming, but on education. The street was named for Hiram Bradford Farmer, whose home was a prominent landmark on it back in 1886 — and still is.

Like James Harvey McClintock, Hiram Bradford Farmer also was a short-term pioneer resident of Tempe who made a big impression on the community that lingers nearly 100 years later. Bearing his name, too, is Arizona State University's education building.

As first principal, and a little bit of everything else besides, at Arizona Territorial Normal School when it opened in February 1886, Farmer was a significant personage in the small town of Tempe for the little more than two years he lived here.

The direction of the town's future was riding on how well the former New Yorker, who had come West initially to serve as principal of schools at Prescott, did his job at the new Normal School. What the Territorial Legislature had given in a weak moment, Tempeans figured, it could just as easily take away and probably would if the chance arose. So on Farmer's shoulders fell the full weight of proving, and proving quickly before the Legislature had a chance to change its mind in its 1887 session, that the territory was ready for higher education and Tempe's Normal School was capable of providing it.

That Arizona State University is going strong today is testimony to how well Farmer accomplished what townspeople expected of him.

Editor John B. Fitch of Tempe's *Salt River Valley News* reported just before first classes began at the Normal School on Feb. 8, 1886, "Professor Farmer thoroughly understands the duties of a Normal School teacher and discharges those duties in a manner that will convince any person that no superficial work will be admissible at that institution."

The new Normal School's initial 33 students learned that was a fact in a hurry.

As principal and one-man faculty (and a lot more besides for his \$230 a month salary), Farmer established a strenuous curriculum for the Normal

School. It was steeped in classical studies and included hard-core training in basics since there were as yet no high schools in the territory to provide that. And as a classical scholar himself, Farmer set a tough pace for his students.

James McClintock, one of those first students, long after recalled that "Professor Farmer was a teacher of the highest order . . . He assumed that everyone in the school came to work, and considered attendance a privilege . . . Work was the lot of anyone who studied under Farmer."

Still those early-day students left the Normal School with a high regard for the strict, dignified, devoted schoolmaster with the pedantic wit. Almost to a one they agreed that he had communicated to them a genuine love of learning that had continued long after they left the Normal School.

In April of 1888, Farmer resigned his position and returned to New York, incensed by insistence that he add agricultural and industrial arts to the Normal School's curriculum.

But in just slightly more than two years, he had earned an indelible place in Tempe's history, starting the town on its path toward becoming a center of education — and in Arizona's history, too. Most of those Normal School graduates went on to become some of Arizona's best early-day teachers and the first to be trained within the territory.

Today, a historic marker stands in front of the old, two-story home on the 800 block of Farmer Avenue where Arizona State University's first president made his home so briefly in Tempe. It designates the house as the Farmer-Goodwin home, since it later became home of another pioneer family prominent in Tempe's beginnings.

But the old house has a page in history of its own, too. There, kindly Hiram Bradford Farmer and his wife provided board and room to some of the Normal School's first young women students, making it the first college dormitory in the state.