

SCHOOL DAZE



WHEN EDUCATION WAS SECONDARY

ETTA PARKS

I WAS A SOURCE of great mental anguish to my mother when I was a sophomore in high school. I refused to wear anything except my favorite and constant costume of sailor cap and dress and cowboy boots. The gob hat had been innocently presented to me by a cousin in the Navy—three years before. Maternal threats of baldness worried me not in the least. I had worn it since I got it, and I fully intended to wear it forever more. I even secretly hoped that I would develop a bald spot so that I would have to wear the cap to cover it, and mother would quit bothering me.

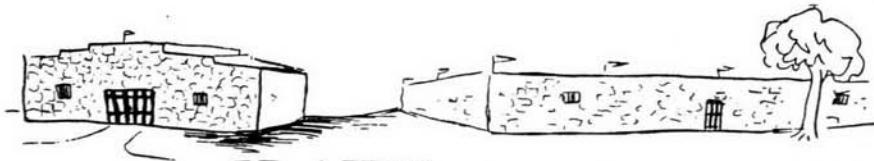
This lively satire, cartoons and all, is the work of a student of J. G. Umstadd, professor of secondary education in the University of Texas. This school is not representative of Texas education any more than it is of education in other states, but the author's good-natured pokes at her high school and the people who run it tell us a great deal about the fundamental weaknesses of some school systems. Recommended for fun—and for helping us to see ourselves as others see us.

I was ripe for a psychiatrist, but Centerville High School offered none. My family probably thought it was too late. Father resigned from the School Board, and the parent of a more hopeful classmate took his place. Now there would be no scandal because I was not an honor student.

I fooled everybody by graduating on schedule. Mostly I think I fooled the faculty, but that is neither here nor there. This is not a story about me; it is about what I learned about high schools when I learned the most about them—when I went to one. If you are looking for something revolutionary, you had better look somewhere else—in the Eighth Year Study or one of John Dewey's books. All I learned in high school was that people are human, i.e., funny. These are the people I learned it from, and these are the sur-



The author



roundings (Environment as in Education) in which I was taught. I do not know by what scientific system the faculty of Centerville High School was trying to teach me, but my method of learning was effortless exposure, a tedious but thorough process.

Centerville High School is nothing to bug your eyes about. It is a completely normal looking two-story building. It was the best-looking edifice in town until the WPA built a gym and football field that have more than a faint resemblance to the state prison, a similarity not noticed until they were complete and it was too late anyway.

The School Board in Centerville is more than somewhat conservative. Crocheting is considered a fine indoor sport for a school-teacher. Before the war, married teachers were not even considered—unless, of course, they could dig up a skeleton in the closet of the chairman of the School Board. Gossip has it, though, that there have been among the faculty since Pearl Harbor a dope fiend and a couple of bigamists.

The community in which Centerville High School thrives is the site of the largest tie and lumber preserving plant in the world (of its kind), as you will learn if ever you correspond with a member of the Centerville Booster Club. It was the Booster Club's idea, and it flowered into the printing of this fact on stationery, and the selling of the stationery to the members of the Booster Club. The Centerville Tribune turned out the printing job, one

—more than a slight resemblance to the state prison of the largest in its history. If you are going to know anything about anything in Centerville, you should begin by acquainting yourself with the Centerville Tribune.

The next most important thing in our community is the size of the Poland China hogs that Willie Watson raises. I am fortunately able to illustrate both the quality of the Centerville Tribune and of Willie Watson's hogs with the same clipping: you do not run across many hogs that weigh 220 pounds at birth.

WILLIE WATSON ATTENDING FAT STOCK

Willie Watson, local breeder of fine hogs is attending the Fat Stock Show in Houston this week, and will bring back some outstanding prizes when he returns.

Mr. Watson has entered one litter of eight, born last Aug. 20th with average weight of 220 pounds each. Also one male born August 15th, last weighing 240 pounds. These are all registered Poland Chinas.

The population of Centerville (1692) is composed of three equal parts of Negroes, Mexicans, and Anglos. Almost all of them work at the Largest Tie and Lumber Preserving Plant in the World. Some of them, like my father, are merchants.

In 1937, we had a rather unusual faculty.

The backbone and terror of it was a Spanish teacher who had missed her calling when she failed to qualify as an instructor in Charles Atlas' Muscle Building Course. Her favorite threat was, "Bring up yer lessons Tuesday er I'll skin yer and stretch yer hide on the board." She had one human trait that baffled her—she was horror stricken at the sight, or even the thought, of a frog or a mouse. She should have become used to them, however, as there was always one in the desk drawer when she opened it. She finally resigned when we got a Mexican boy in Spanish class who could not understand her.

The bane of our Spanish teacher's existence was Mr. O'Malley, the geometry teacher, an Irishman from Arkansas. My family dined at the boarding house where the teachers ate, and I was present on one occasion when Mr. O'Malley upset the Spanish teacher to such an extent that she dropped a bowl of mashed potatoes on his plate and anatomy. Mr. O'Malley had to retire from teaching for the afternoon to have his only suit cleaned. It was rumored that he was a poet at heart, and longed to return to his native state—the School

Board gave him this opportunity at the end of the term.

The coach and science teacher was a graduate of the University of Alabama and wore an Alabama football jacket to prove it. He always lamented the fact that he had not become a preacher. The class lamented with him. His favorite lesson was one in which he drew a picture of the universe, with a diagram of heaven above it and hell below. He predicted that the world would come to an end last August. He was the only science teacher I ever knew who believed that the gasoline engine would never replace the horse.

On the gridiron, our coach said very noble things. At one home-coming game, in the beginning of a very depressing third quarter, he is known to have made the classic encouraging statement to his bedraggled team:

"O.K., boys. We're only eighty-seven points behind. Now if you all will get in there and REALLY HUSTLE, we can win this old ball game." Spirit did not improve sufficiently, however.

Among the most outstanding students in our class was Marvel Celeste Jones. There was nothing celestial about her; she



—the thriving community of Centerville

overwhelmed the scales at something like 180. Even the superintendent had his qualms when he came into conflict with her.

You would not have a complete picture of our High School if you didn't know something about the curriculum. Home economics was the most radical subject offered. The School Board took it out every other year while trying to decide if it was too daring and revolutionary.



The School Board—somewhat conservative

By far the most important and exciting event of any school year was the School Carnival. The school took two weeks off to prepare for it, and two weeks to tear it down. We built stands and made posters, heckled the merchants for goods to give away as bingo and lottery prizes. We thought of every excuse to get out of classes to help get ready for the big night. I carried a small stepladder around the school grounds for two days before the faculty realized that I wasn't going anywhere, and sent me back to classes.

The carnival always started at 7:30 so everybody could be home in bed by 11. At 9:30 the evening was climaxed by the crowning of the queen. The coronation was always very dramatic, with heralds attired in their fathers' old union suits (dyed green) and announcing at the tops of their cracked voices that the imposing figure now gracing the aisle was "Josephine of the House of Wopotsky" or something.

One of the most memorable carnivals I ever witnessed was attended by a number of rather unhappy situations. The queen discarded her majestic bearing two days before the scheduled coronation and climbed a fence at a ball game, fell off, and sprained her knee. Even the staggering movement with which all high school queens approach the stage was not enough to overcome this difficulty. In the second place, the king was allergic to the false grass mats, borrowed from the funeral parlor, which covered the throne and stage. To top it all off, the crown-bearer, age 3, revolted at the last minute and refused to budge. The crown was borne, needless to say, by Marvel Celeste Jones. But at the last and most inopportune moment, with Marvel Celeste already well on her way down the aisle, the crown-bearer decided to go anyway. He sat, unbeknownst to the queen until she arrived at the throne, on the tail end of her train, smiling placidly and waving to his friends—but ignoring the train-bearers who resented his extra weight and tried to shoo him off. The audience, I think, took it for a farce and gave the performance the biggest hand in Carnival history.

Well, that is a part of a picture of the place in which I got secondarily educated. There is a more serious scholastic side of life down there, too, but somehow it never has been as interesting to the students. We have algebra classes and English themes and six-week reports that are no more pleasant than they are to students anywhere. Our educational temperature would quite likely be zero minus in a lot of things, and I shudder to think of what one good solid progressive idea would do to the School Board. Maybe it would be a good idea if somebody grabbed an Evaluative Criteria and dashed down to save Centerville High School.

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