

THE CHANGING HIGH SCHOOL

Boredom and Tension Replace 'Golden Age'

This is the first in a five-part series on life in a Los Angeles city high school. Beginning last fall, three Times reporters spent a cumulative total of two months at Hamilton High, attending classes and talking with students and teachers. They made their final visit in May. These are their impressions of what they saw and heard. The series is by education writers Noel Greenwood and Jack McCurdy and staff writer Celeste Durant.

In the foyer of Hamilton High School's main building stands a stone figure of Alexander Hamilton—stern-faced, right arm flung defiantly across his chest, his body tensed forward as if he were about to step from his pedestal and stride across the Santa Monica Freeway without so much as a pause for traffic.

Memories are vague on how long Alex (as he is known at Hamilton High) has been standing in the tile-floored foyer, staring just over the heads of the youngsters jostling and chattering past him on their way to classes or the vice principal's office or out behind the gym for a furtive cigaret.

Surely in 1931 when Hamilton High first opened its doors—when there was no Santa Monica Freeway and "inner city school" was a euphemism yet undiscovered—it was thought fitting and proper to name a high school after Alexander Hamilton, one of the nation's founding fathers and the paragon of American conservatism.

But now, Alex in his wig and knee breeches seems an ironic symbol of all that is anachronistic about Hamilton High (and most other public high schools): modeled after the factory of 19th century America, by its very structure resistant to change, trapped here in 1973 in a day and age not of its own design or liking.

Not a Typical School

This is a story about life at Hamilton High School. It is not a typical high school (if indeed there is one), and this is not meant to be a story about a typical high school.

But perhaps enough of Hamilton's experiences are shared by other public high schools to be able to say: Here at least are some truths about public high schools today, some sense of what it is like to be inside them.

"I don't think it's Hamilton that's the problem. It's the whole public school system; it stinks and it must change soon. I'm a senior now, and things were pretty good for me. But I feel for all the new people coming. Public schools are going downhill."
—A 12th-grade student

Hamilton High School is in the Westside community of Palms at 2955 Robertson Blvd. Once it was the very image of an All-American high school on the suburban fringes of Los Angeles. Now it is an urban high school, with all the pressures and troubles which accompany that change in status.

Apartment houses and homes surround the rear and two sides of the 21-acre campus, while the concrete underpinnings of the Santa Monica Freeway and a somewhat-weary commercial district of small stores and businesses are its close neighbors to the front.

It is one of 55 high schools operated by the Los Angeles City school system.

Architecturally, its one saving grace is the main administration and classroom building, an imposing three-story brick and tile-roofed structure framed by a lawn and tall trees.

(It is not, however, earthquake-

safe and is destined for rehabilitation in the fall of 1974.)

The rest of the campus is a conglomerate of stucco and wood-frame buildings, all painted in the drab brown that is the dubious trademark of Los Angeles City schools.

Within the chain-link fencing and locked gates that surround the campus, there are broad expanses of asphalt relieved occasionally by trees, one pleasant courtyard-like area between two buildings, and the athletic fields to the rear of the school. It has no swimming pool and no lights on the football field.

The girls' vice principal cheerfully tells visitors:

"I think this is a beautiful plant." It clearly is not. But as city high schools go, neither is it in terribly bad shape.

On a Rainy Day

The hallways and grounds are relatively free of litter except on rainy days when students take refuge inside corridors and leave behind a trail of empty milk cartons, bread crusts and crumpled sandwich wrappings.

The shop buildings are well equipped, what landscaping there is seems well tended, and the walls are remarkably clear of graffiti (one rare specimen, on a trophy case window: "This Window Rated X").

But there also are the depressing sight of windows left boarded up for months—in the wake of a fire, a wretched old wood-frame building that serves as a student snack bar, a cafeteria that needs replacing (the unsafe classrooms on its second floor have been locked up), and too many badly ventilated classrooms ("It's either cold or hot," one teacher says wearily.)

"People at Hamilton speak on two levels. One, the way Hamilton should be or the way they would like it to be or the way things used to be, and two, the way things really are."

—A teacher

Each weekday morning shortly after 8, signaled by a long, loud jangle of school bells, the first contingent of Hamilton High's 2,350 students (minus the 150 to 200 who are absent on any given day) slam lockers, settle into chairs, make small jokes, yawn and otherwise prepare, as they have since September, for another day of classes.

Once, less than a decade ago, the faces were mainly those of white youngsters from middle- to upper-middle-class Jewish families.

Some veteran members of the faculty look yearningly back on that period and call it Hamilton's golden age. Their memory is of classrooms full of parent-prodded, anxious-to-succeed students who did not question a teacher's authority and who often bit off more work than they were even assigned. It was, says one teacher, "like an exclusive prep school."

To what extent that memory has been enhanced by the passage of time and events is difficult to say.

"The so-called golden age was not all that good," scoffs one 11-year veteran of the faculty. "We had differ-

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SCHOOL SENTINEL A student shares Alexander Hamilton's vantage point in the foyer of changing Hamilton High School. Times photo by Joe Kennedy



HEADQUARTERS A lawn and tall trees frame Hamilton's main administration-classroom building. Times photos by Joe Kennedy

The Changing Urban High School

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ent problems then. Hamilton used to be called the 'shark bin' because students were enthusiastic but they ate you alive. They put pressure on you, they gave the teacher a hard time. A lot were sharp but in an antagonistic way."

Whatever the truth about the golden age, Hamilton is a different school today. And the most visible difference is that there are "black faces at Hamilton now.

Hamilton High in the mid-1960s was almost 90% white. It had a few blacks and even fewer Mexican-Americans and Asian-Americans. But then black enrollment began to climb, sending tremors of apprehension through the white community.

Some whites fled the school, the black influx accelerated, and by 1971 white enrollment had dropped to 57% of the total. An unprecedented (for Los Angeles City schools) racial freeze on student transfer permits, put into effect in early 1972, virtually halted the rapid growth in black enrollment.

Racial Tensions

But with the racial transformation had come new tensions: between black student and white student, between black student and a mainly white faculty and administration.

Violence and petty crime—often swirling in lockstep with racial fears and hostilities and much of it black against white—were no longer somebody else's problem.

Black students tended to come with poorer academic preparation, something the school was not prepared to cope with. The blacks also brought an ethnicity all their own that immediately clashed with the school's dominant Jewish culture.

The combination fueled the conviction of many whites that blacks were plainly ruining Hamilton High, or at least ruining the white image of what Hamilton ought to be.

But racial change was not the only pressure on Hamilton in the latter half of the 60s and the early 70s.

The drug phenomenon spilled over high school and college campuses across America and Hamilton was no exception.

"There wasn't a week went by when we didn't take one or two kids out of here in handcuffs—under the influence," says one administrator.

Neither was Hamilton spared when student militancy erupted: bands of demonstrators ran shouting through corridors, classrooms were disrupted and police were summoned to the campus.

And when Los Angeles City schoolteachers went on strike for

the first time in the district's history, Hamilton paid an especially high price.

The strike drove a wedge between striking and nonstriking teachers.

"People who had been teaching together for years wouldn't talk to each other," recalls one teacher.

It also stirred the emotions of students, many of whom sympathized with the striking teachers.

The Hamilton faculty emerged from the strike thoroughly demoralized, many strikers left doubly frustrated over a seeming victory that turned out to be something less.

The school was also stumbling through a succession of new administrations (it has had four principals in the past five years). And, as one teacher puts it, there was "a feeling of instability and helplessness."

Finally, something was happening to many of those white middle-class youngsters who once seemed such a known—even docile—quantity to teachers.

Many of them were emerging as more questioning, more cynical, less

impressed with the teacher's authority, not terribly interested in the day's assignment, and, in fact, not terribly impressed with the whole business of high school.

Put simply, what used to work in the classroom for many veteran teachers at Hamilton was not working any more.

Some teachers greeted the change with at least a measure of approval. ("Things are more honest," said one. "When kids talk to me now it's because they like me and not because I'm going to be used by them to get them into college.") But many more were hurt, baffled and even angered. ("They listen to me but they don't feel anything I'm saying is worth a damn," said one.)

Now, in 1973, the tantalizing question is which of these events—or which combination of them—has had the most telling effect on Hamilton? But causes and effects spin dizzily into each other, and pulling the threads apart is an impossible task.

"Your head works by the bell system in this school. Having a biology class one period, your mind is tuned into biology. The period after, I go to math and teachers expect you to automatically turn off biology and tune in math. Do that for five months and see how bored YOU get!"

—A 12th grade student

The day at Hamilton is divided with great precision: six class periods of 53 minutes each, with 7 minutes to get from one class to the next, 13 minutes to gulp a quick snack in the morning and 37 minutes to cram in lunch, all to the accompaniment of bells, bells and more bells.

It is testimony to the remarkable adaptability of teachers and students alike that someone has not attacked the bell system with pliers and ballpeen hammer, putting it to a final, merciful death.

For the bells are symbolic of the ordered regimen that pervades each day at Hamilton, taking its toll of both students and teachers.

Says one teacher when asked what the school needs: "Less regimentation with classes—always inside, always with bells."

This is not to say there is a total gloom about the school. Indeed, for some students, Hamilton is a good place to be.

"I just plainly love my school although there's nothing special about it," says one 12th grader.

But there are many more who seem unhappy about being there.

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RECESS - The day at school may be regimented, but there are a few private moments.

HIGH SCHOOL

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"I can't exactly pinpoint what bothers me about this school," says another 12th grader. "I just don't have a good feeling inside when I come here."

Part of it undoubtedly is the sheer routine of the daily schedule, a rigid framework that, while it may be practical, does little to promote good teaching or learning. Bells interrupt classes in the midst of exciting discoveries. They don't come soon enough to rescue other classes from the drudgery of busy work assigned to pad out the hour.

Once, to Hamilton's credit, the school took a stab at organizing a less-pressured, more flexible schedule. But it was slapped down by school district administrators who claimed the new schedule was illegal.)

Classroom Boredom

Another part of the problem is what is happening within the classrooms. Even discounting youthful exaggeration, it is clear that boredom there runs high among Hamilton students.

Students tend to blame it on the way teachers teach.

"Teachers," says one emphatic 11th grader, "are always giving long lectures and seldom make them very interesting. . . They're usually just slamming a book down at you and saying, 'Read page so-and-so and then do the questions on page so-and-so and if you don't finish it here it'll be homework.' Blah, blah, blah—BORING!"

Teachers tend to blame it on an aimless desire of students to be entertained.

"How can I compete with Rowan and Martin, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello?" asks one. "I am going to have sparks of brilliance, but 53 minutes, 5 periods a day—I can't hack it."

Here again, cause and effect become entangled. But it is worth pointing out that there are teachers who have escaped this complaint, whose classes are much sought after by students. What their classes are like—for they are not all entertainers—is a subject for later, more intensive discussion.

Tight Security

Two other factors have a distinct bearing on the quality of life at Hamilton: the unrelenting security measures that are in force and the invisible wall between blacks and whites. The school is a relatively safe place to be, far safer, in fact, than the public might assume.

One reason is the tight security system: two full-time armed security

agents in the school, a city police car that frequently patrols the area around the school, most gates kept locked most of the time, and adult aides who patrol school corridors and watch who comes and goes through the limited entrances.

The school is not free of crime or violence. Security agents or police made 68 arrests there in 1972 (about three-fourths of them Hamilton students) for suspected crimes ranging from malicious mischief and drug use to assault, arson and robbery.

There are students who avoid using school bathrooms for fear of being attacked or shaken down for loose change.

Crime Downplayed

But the incidence of crime appears to have fallen in the past year, and neither students nor teachers view violence as a serious problem.

The lingering question is what price the school has paid in terms of the atmosphere that such a system inevitably creates?

"I wish it weren't necessary, but it is," says one teacher.

Students, who must have special passes to leave campus during the school day and who may be challenged if seen in the corridors while classes are in session, are far more ambivalent about security than teachers (who strongly applaud it).

Unmistakably, most students want the protection, want to feel safe—and they will say so. But there is a rather large student backlash against the way security has affected their daily lives.

"We're being treated," says one in a not-untypical comment, "as if we are in some kind of prison."

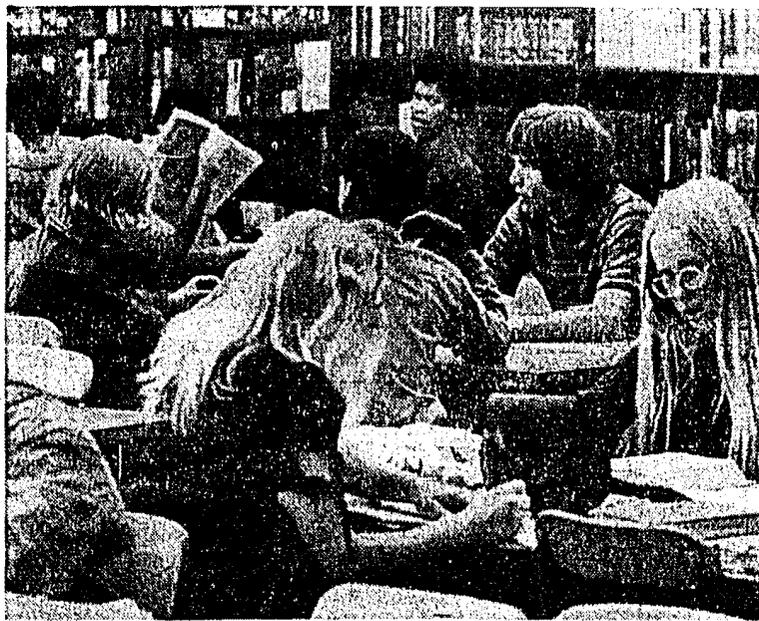
Stern Measures

The security system is backed up by fairly stern disciplinary measures. About 9% of Hamilton's students have been suspended this year and the number of students transferred for disciplinary or related reasons has doubled.

Race relations is a more complicated issue. Black and white students, generally speaking, coexist at Hamilton. Self-segregation is evident.

There is some regret and discomfort among both blacks and whites over the fact that it is this way. ("The whites act too white and the blacks act too black," says one white student.)

There is some small strain of outright racial hatred on both sides.



HITTING THE BOOKS.—Students read and study in Hamilton High library. Times photo by Joe Kennedy

Where there is fear, it tends to be white fear of blacks. White students tend to shun school dances and athletic events at night, largely because they or their parents fear violence at the hands of blacks.

There is, as well, some good feeling about Hamilton's racial mix.

Said one black student when asked what was best about Hamilton: "That it's mixed company."

But the dominant feeling, outwardly at least, is a pragmatic acceptance of race relations as they are, a shrugging sort of attitude that it is no big issue.

"It's not paradise," says one white student, "But I don't see any problems. Everyone says there is a racial problem before anything happens. People are looking for problems."

The school library was crowded with about 400 parents and students, gathered for Hamilton High's first tea in honor of students who had earned very high grades during the semester just ended.

"This is what you should write about — the good kids," said one parent. "The good kids taking their parents to meet their teachers and talking to each other."

Impressions crowd the mind after a few months at Hamilton High School.

Stories of the school's academic decline seem exaggerated. There is some good teaching going on, and there are teachers who have worked hard to create imaginative new classes that run the gamut from "consumer protection" to "philosophy through literature."

The school has gained a measure of badly needed stability, due in no small

part to its feisty, enterprising (albeit autocratic) principal of two years, Josephine C. Jimenez.

There are youngsters who seem genuinely engaged in what they are doing.

It is not easy to forget the exuberant girl in theater arts who, watching a final rehearsal of the student production of "My Fair Lady," was so bursting with emotion that she

just had to blurt out, "God, it's so neat!"

But other images also persist. A teacher methodically plodding through a history book, leading a sleepy class from one page to the next: "Is that what Jefferson did? Is it? Page 203, first column."

Another teacher, in his mid-50s perhaps, talking about how quickly teachers burn themselves out, how the system grinds them down, himself tired and ready to retire.

And a boy, a 12th grader, trying as best he can to explain why he is bored in his classes, scrawling: "Don't understand them."

And a school hamstrung by a myriad of rules and regulations—some bordering on the surreal—handed down from above by faceless bureaucrats and a board of education in remote offices miles from Hamilton.

And the stream of human problems dumped on the school from the outside (the mother, her voice raised, telling the girls' vice principal: "I am not going to tell you I can make her do the work. She hates me, she hates her

father, she hates everybody."

And Alex, standing resolute on his pedestal, with a flower that someone has laid just in the crook of his defiant right arm.

Next: The academic side of Hamilton High.