

The Rise & Fall of Polytechnic High School of Polytechnic High School

What follows here is a brief, two part, history of our “Grand Lady in Granite”. For seventy years, Polytechnic High School was one of San Francisco’s finest educational institutions. Seemingly overnight, the school collapsed into a “blackboard jungle.” In this history we will take a brief look at the good years and the bad with the final “coup de grace” being demolition.

“Now only the memories and the written history remain.”

Our thanks to Gary Marte (Spring 1955) for sending us this material written by Greg Gaar which began with the September 1984 issue of the *Haight Ashbury Newspaper*.

PART 1: “The Finest School in San Francisco”

The roots of Polytechnic go way back to 1884. Originally called the Commercial School and located on Powell between Clay and Sacramento, only one class was offered and the facilities were overcrowded. The school moved to the corner of Bush and Stockton. In 1890 academic subjects were added to the curriculum and in 1894 art and shop were introduced. The school was officially named Polytechnic High School. By 1900, 950 students were attending classes and “Poly” gained a reputation as the leading school in the “City”. Shortly thereafter, the commercial classes separated from Poly and created Commerce High School. Only 120 students remained at Poly. Naturally, on April 18, 1906, the first Polytechnic was destroyed by the great earthquake and fire.

Greg Gaar says he hates to admit it, but after the quake, Poly classes were held at the Affiliated Colleges (UCSF) until “earthquake cottages” were erected below Carl Street as temporary class rooms. It took two municipal elections to raise \$600,000 needed to construct the new school. A change in the administration at City Hall delayed completion, but finally the shops building on Carl Street opened in 1912 and the main building opened in 1915 (the boy’s gym was not built until 1929 and the girl’s gym in 1937).

The following excerpt is taken from the 1915 Poly Journal (Year Book):

“Our dream has come true and we now have the finest, most modern school west of the Rocky Mountains. With its stately appearance and complete equipment it now remains for the pupils to regain Poly’s supremacy over the high schools of San Francisco.”

With 2000 students, Poly became the largest school in San Francisco. The student body lived in the Inner Sunset and the Haight, so school activities were often entwined with neighborhood needs. Erosion was a problem then and in 1984 is still a problem in Buena Vista Park; so around 1920, Poly students, under the direction of teacher John Drew, built stone retaining walls.

During the early twenties, student body president James Rolph III led the lobbying campaign to build a sports stadium across the street from Poly. His task was not difficult since his daddy, “Sunny Jim” Rolph, was the Mayor of San Francisco. By 1925, Kezar Stadium had replaced John McLaren’s nursery and the “Poly Parrots” were tearing up the gridiron. Tennis great, Helen Gaynor, attended Poly during this decade.

The talk of the 1933 Poly Journal was the outstanding achievement of baby-faced, student body president Casper Weinberger, who rewrote the school constitution. The future Secretary of Defense gave more power to students in school policy making. He used the U.S. Constitution as a model for the document.

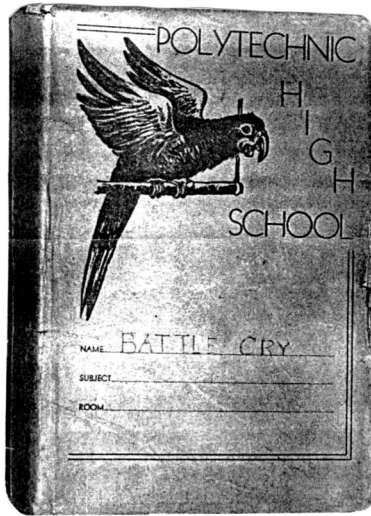
James Addicott, principal of Poly for nearly a quarter of a century, is given credit for instilling into the student body a deep sense of school spirit and an unquestioning respect for authority. Greg Gaar’s mother went to Poly from 1936 to 1939 and recalls “During surprise locker inspections if a student was caught with one grain of tobacco, it was immediate expulsion. Girls were not allowed to leave the campus until their senior year and then they could only go to The Creamery (Higher Taste in 1984). The guys were not restricted.”



POLYTECHNIC
HIGH SCHOOL
ERECTED AD 1914

Greg's mother, Barbara Peterson during her Poly days, was editor of The Poly Journal and assistant editor of the Polly Parrot, a bi-weekly newspaper. She has fond memories of high school: "The Haight was a poor neighborhood during the depression, but we all knew each other since we came from Grattan or Dudley Stone schools to Poly. I had many fine teachers. The school spirit stimulated community spirit. We went on outings to the beach and Playland.

Dances were held every other week. We jitterbugged to big band music. The senior picnic was always held in Children's Playground and we'd dress up like little children and have a wonderful time. During the festivities for the World's Fair in 1939, Haight Street was closed off and people wore Spanish or cowboy costumes. Everyone was dancing in the street."



The annual event in the Haight-Ashbury was the "Turkey Day" football

game between the neighborhood rival high schools Poly and Lowell. "Poly ranked second to Lowell in academics, but we were unique because we combined shop with academics," according to Greg's mother. She remembers the Poly kids would parade down Haight Street and over to old Lowell at Hayes and Ashbury. "We would serenade the Lowell students. They had their ax and we had our parrot. Our colors were red and black. Theirs were red and white. 50,000 people attended the big game and emotions ran high. If Poly lost we would cry."

Poly grads from the thirties include such famous people as the noted courtroom artist Howard Brodie ('32) and the whipping boy for Groucho Marx on "You Bet Your Life", George Fenneman. George was president of both the senior class and the Drama Club. Now that his bread and butter seems to come from those Home Savings commercials, I wonder if he wishes he were back at Poly performing in the Merchant of Venice or starring in the term play, Pride and Prejudice?

As the most respected trade school in The City, Poly supplied San Francisco's once numerous industries and trades with trained workers. The school's shop buildings consisted of an auto shop, wood shop, machine shop, foundry, and a large print shop. On Carl Street, the school looked and sounded like a factory.

During the forties, Bill Lam ('44), who now ('84) works at the Photo Center in Duboce Park, told me that Poly kids,

including himself, used to avoid paying fares on the N Judah streetcar by jumping on the "cow catcher" and riding through Sunset Tunnel.

School spirit remained Poly's main asset. Malcom Brown ('49) remembers celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the discovery of gold in 1948, "students dressed up like cowboys and Indians and staged an impromptu attack on a passing streetcar." Bob St. Clair, the future San Francisco 49'er and district five supervisory candidate, "wore only a loin cloth."

Speaking of football players, the Poly Parrots ruled the roost when it came to high school sports, especially football. Between 1925—68, Poly won 39 city championships in high school sports, including 13 football titles. Between 1942 and 1961, under the late, great head coach, Milt Axt, the Parrots won 45 straight games. The most important statistic during the Milt Axt years: Not once did Poly lose to Lowell! Three San Francisco 49'ers came from Poly: Alyn Beales, Bob St. Clair, and Gary Lewis.

With the addition of a new electronics lab in 1957 and the traditionally great football teams, Poly entered the 60's with great optimism. No one could have guessed that disaster was imminent.



The below was taken in Sept, 1984 as the staff of the Perennial Parrot made use of their "Last Hall Pass" to take one final journey in search of that elusive "4th floor swimming pool." I can't help but wonder if any of you actually got



your feet wet in that "POOL."

The question to be answered now is what were the events that occurred between the end of the 50s and this last walk through these hallowed halls of Polytechnic?

You'll find out in PART 2,
"The Death of a Great High School"