

The Rise & Fall of Polytechnic High School

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

PART 2: “The Death of a Great High School”

Poly surged into the sixties with high hopes, but shortsighted city and school district policies failed to cope with the upheavals of that decade. Poly fell into a tailspin, from which she never recovered.

In the late 50's, the Redevelopment Agency began demolishing thousands of housing units in the Western Addition. Uprooted black families moved into the Haight Ashbury and the Irish Catholic establishment fled to suburbia. The Haight became the City's first thoroughly integrated neighborhood and, by 1963, Poly's student body was 25% black. (Lowell High School moved to Eucalyptus Drive in 1962 so Poly was the last public high school in the neighborhood.)

Initially, Principal Ivor Calloway found the new diversity at Poly challenging. According to former Boy's Dean and Principal Paul Lucey, “Ivor couldn't wait to get to school in the morning.”

But on May 30, 1963, racist slogans were found posted on Poly's bulletin boards fusing an explosive situation. The signs read; “Stamp Out Nigger-White Rule!”, “Nigger Go Back To Africa!”, and “Nigger Stay Out Of The Rest Room” Ironically, two black girls confessed to the prank and were arrested for “Inciting to riot.”

Principal Calloway claimed the act was a result of “what's happening in Birmingham.” “The tension has been terrific, but I believe it's over now.”

Politically influential white parents, afraid to send their kids to Poly, convinced the Board of Education to establish a special “option system.” Students residing between Poly, Ocean Beach, Kirkham, and Golden Gate Park, were granted the option to choose Lincoln or Poly. Black families east of Poly had no option. Within three years, Poly's enrollment declined from 2000 to 1700 and became predominantly black.

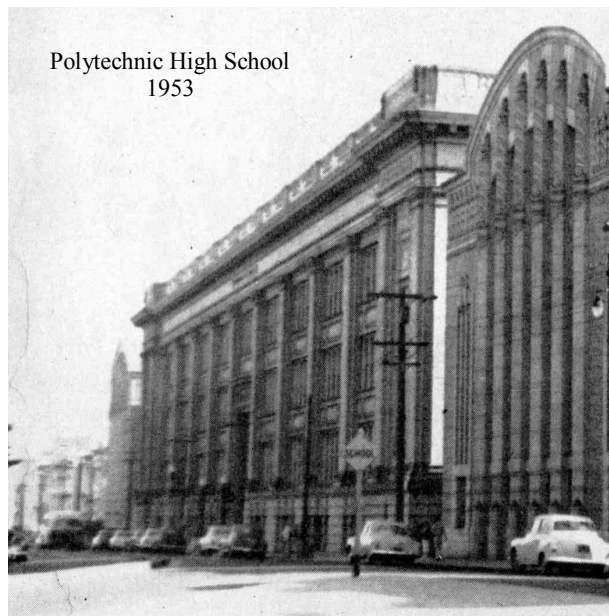
Tommy S., who still lived in the Haight in Sept 1984, remembered his alma mater in '65-'66. “It was hip for black kids from all over the City to hang out at Poly 'cause it was a black school. O.J. Simpson came over from Galileo. Kids cut their first period class to smoke cigarettes and eat donuts at Johnson's. Sly Stone performed at Poly when he was still a DJ at KSOL.”

On November 2, 1966, the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council

recommended that the United School District and the Board of Education “eliminate the option system before Poly becomes all black.” The Teachers Union threatened a strike or mass resignations “If racial balance is not achieved at Poly.” A union spokesman maintained, “The school district has been dragging its feet.”

Poly teachers then presented a list of their demands to the school district;

- 1 ... Troublemakers and nonstudents be removed from the campus.
- 2 ... Change school boundaries to attract more white students.
- 3 ... Establish a full academic program.
- 4 ... Reduce class size.
- 5 ... Increase security.



While researching the '66 and '67 Poly Journals, Greg Garr also noticed another glaring problem. Poly had only one black faculty member while the student body was 60% black.

On December 1, 1966, Superintendent Harold Spears promised to end the “option system”, but not until the start of the spring semester. Frantically, white parents shifted their kids to over crowded Lincoln.

On March 17, 1967, Poly students rioted at Playland. “Two hundred teenagers leaving Poly's annual skating party went on a rampage,” wrote the Examiner. “They smashed several concessions, stole more than 100

stuffed animals, broke windows worth \$1300, and escaped with liquor from a nearby food market.”

In the school newspaper, The Poly Parrot, student body advisor, Miss Ruiz, denounced the bad press the school received from the Hearst newspapers: “Unfair slanting and exaggerated news coverage are responsible for the defacing of Poly's image.”

Kate Northcott went against the grain by transferring from “elitist” Lowell to attend Poly in '66-'67 ... “Poly was my neighborhood school and I wanted to go to school with blacks. I loved the flexibility and freedom students received at Poly. There was room for me to be rebellious at Poly and that was not the case at Lowell. There was a small group of liberal white kids (hippie types) who took poetry, writing, and art classes; then we cut school to hang out on Haight Street. No one would notice. Through Poly was a gloomy, gloomy place, I never felt held back or in any danger.”

Paul Lucey, temporary principal at Poly in early 1968, told Greg Gaar, "The stress and strain during those days was enormous." Mr. Lucey by the way, was a Marine fighter pilot during the Korean War. "Education at Poly in '68 was buffeted by Flower Power and Black Power. The drug scene was totally out of control and no white principal could have handled the job."



Senior Bench, Spring 1955

Nathaniel Brooks became San Francisco's first black principal when he took Poly's helm on May 22, 1968. All hell broke loose on October 23, 1968 at the corner of Fredrick and Willard when an ex-student was shot and severely wounded by two Poly kids over "drugs or a gambling debt." The same day, instructor Robert Over was attacked by a student during drama class.

These incidents were the straw that broke the camel's back. Twenty teachers wrote a letter to the Board of Education listing Poly's problems:

- * A survey shows one third of the students regularly take drugs on campus and Park Emergency treats five students daily for drugs.
- * Attacks on students by other students are rampant.
- * Arson, chemical mace attacks, and possession of dangerous weapons are on the increase.
- * Prostitution and pimping are widespread and open.
- * Over 50% of Poly's sophomores never graduate and truancy runs 30% daily.

Principal Brooks responded, "There is some truth to the letter, but it's an exaggeration. We have serious problems, but Poly only reflects society at large. It's a ghetto school and it has the problems of the ghetto."

Teacher Jack Edmond spoke more bluntly. "If one were to design a facility deliberately designed to punish children, degrade teachers, and retard education, one could hardly do better than Poly." Demanding the firing of the teachers who signed the letter, 800 outraged students marched on the Board of Education. The teenagers carried placards which read; "I'm a Poly Whore" and "Pimps and Prostitutes on Strike for Better Pay." Student body president Gregory Burrell met with administrators and insisted that soul food be served for lunch, teachers be trained in Black history, and Swahili classes be offered. "This is not a matter of race, but of education," Burrell told the press.

During the summer break of 1969, Principal Brooks quit. Angered at downtown administrators for ignoring student demands, Brooks concluded "One can't teach in a segregated school, when society is integrated."

By late 1969, Poly was 80% black and enrollment was under 1000. Gangs charged to use the restrooms and the school district encouraged transfers to other schools.

David Haight, coincidentally related to Governor Henry Huntley Haight, joined the faculty in November 1969 and ran the electronics lab. "Within six months, thousands of dollars of equipment was stolen. This kid pulled a gun on me in class and asked, 'How'd you like to die?'" We spoke, man to man, for twenty minutes and shook hands. The following semester he was an "A" student.



Senior Bench, Fall 1984

"It was difficult for a white instructor to win the trust of the black students," explained Mr. Haight. "Putting in extra time or giving the kids some coffee money generated some respect. But the stress at Poly ruined my health and my career. Problems continued to plague the school in the seventies. In 1970, the late Judge Cragen's son was "viciously beaten" by classmates. A faculty member and a former Poly coed were accidentally killed in a sauna.

A structural investigation revealed that all the campus buildings, except the Girl's Gym, failed to meet Field Act (1933) requirements for earthquake safety. "The hazard is so great that vacation of the premises should be given highest priority." Protective "earthquake barriers" were erected around the buildings. In June 1971, the Board of Education voted to demolish the academic building immediately and replace it with low rise bungalows. Of course, this never happened.

In the final years, Poly was used to test new educational programs. The Student Directed Curriculum (SDC) gave the students the opportunity to study whatever struck their fancy. David Haight recalled that students spent the day making fudge or cooking while others would play with dolls. He believes that SDC was a failure because "it prevented the kids from learning basic academic discipline."

(Editors Note: I have a few thoughts of my own about this paragraph.)

The LEAP program brought Langley Porter interns and San Francisco State students to Poly as counselors for truants.

As a sign of the times, the once great Poly football team lost their last eighteen games. The last shinning moment for the Poly Parrots was national recognition of the school choir, directed by Johnny Land.

The Poly student body was absorbed into the new McAtter High School and the name Polytechnic High School ceased to exist. The Poly buildings became the lair for the Mission Bears while their school was renovated from 1973 to 1977.

Since 1977, only pigeons, rats, and some dedicated squatters have occupied the crumbling old school. The prospect of affordable housing and a community center on the site envisions a future as exciting as the good old days at Polytechnic High School.

the end

In early October, 1984, the not yet Staff of the unborn "Perennial Parrot Newsletter" and other members of the soon to be formed "Our Gang", attended the 30 year reunion of the Class of 1954. Included in the activities was a "Last Walk Through The Halls Of Poly." It was a time to pay our last respects to "Our Great Lady in Granite." It was a time to pause for a moment within her walls and remember the warmth of her Heart. It was a time to feel a tear move slowly down your cheek. I'm sure that those of us who made use of our final "Hall Pass" and took that last walk through those "Hallowed Halls" will have the sights of that afternoon forever burned in our memory. We returned once again in 1987 to view the rubble of demolition.

Our thanks, once again, to Gary Marte for sending this article to us so we could share it with each of you.



Hail Polytechnic
Long Live Thy Name

Polytechnic High School San Francisco, CA



December
1987

Hail
Polytechnic,



Long Live
Thy Name.

One - Two -
Three - Four



Three - Two -
One - Four

Who For?
What For?



Who We Going
To Yell For?