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Prom:
How a High School Ritual
Brought Youth Closer to Adulthood,
1890-1970

By
Candace Sinin Chen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
History
in the
Graduate Division

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Paula Fass, Chair
Professor David Henkin
Professor Barrie Thorne

Spring 2012

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in History

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This dissertation argues that prom is a distinctive ritual, whose history offers a singular perspective on changing understandings of the passage from youth to adulthood and the role of the high school in that transition. Initially the outgrowth of a vibrant student culture at elite all-male universities such as Yale, where juniors organized their first prom in the mid- nineteenth century, the prom spread around the country among coed college students who gradually adopted this social institution over the next fifty years. By the 1910s, the prom was established not only in colleges, but in high schools as well, as younger students sought to emulate “sophisticated” collegiate life. Adult administrators had an interest in encouraging this more grown-up behavior as long as they could maintain control. At the high school level, the prom reveals how students conflated adulthood with social mobility and autonomy.

In my research I draw heavily on student publications from high schools in San Francisco, Milwaukee, and Baltimore, as well as a variety of local newspapers and popular magazines, such as *Seventeen* and *Senior Scholastic*. These sources offer a diverse mix of youth voices and adult perspectives. My work deepens our historical understanding of how educational institutions served as incubators of youth culture, and argues further that high school students actively constructed their youth culture as a training ground for adulthood. For much of the twentieth century, as secondary education expanded, high school graduation symbolized a transition to adulthood and the promise of social mobility. As one avenue for students to rehearse the identities they wanted to assume as adults and to assert themselves in negotiations with administrators and other authority figures, the prom illuminates the social construction of age and adulthood. Prom’s longevity as a high school tradition speaks to its ability to shift alongside students’ ideas of their own youth and maturity. It also underscores the evolution of youth culture from customs transmitted more by peers to one that has become ever more mediated by adults.

My dissertation begins by foregrounding the high school prom with an examination of the origins of the prom in college life and how its transmission between campuses reflected college students’ desire to imitate more elite campuses. In the second chapter, I contextualize the prom within the environment of high school dances. Students embraced dancing as an activity that

expressed their youth but part of dancing's appeal was how it also allowed students to emulate adult behavior and the privileged classes. The next chapter explores the endurance of prom king elections in the Milwaukee area where the boisterousness of prom king elections led school administrators to seek greater control over students' campaigning activities, but students' dedication to their tradition pushed the administration to negotiate, rather than dictate, new campaign practices. I then examine students' debates over what extravagance and formality contributed to prom's significance as a ritual and students' challenges to the cost of prom, which proved prohibitive for some. I close my dissertation by looking at how adults from media, education, community organizations, and business, sought to take a more active role in proms during the postwar period.

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Introduction

In American society, the prom is more than just a dance. If it were just a dance, the prom would not be featured as the centerpiece of countless teen movies. Instead, Hollywood moviemakers regularly call upon our popular understanding of the prom as a rite of passage. Thus prom is the climactic scene where Carrie gets covered in pig's blood in Stephen King's dark tale. Most often though, the prom is where boy gets girl such as when *Pretty in Pink*'s rich kid Blaine apologizes to Andie, Molly Ringwald's character. In 2011, Disney devoted an entire film, *Prom*, to teens preparing for the event, undergoing heartache, and eventually finding romantic resolution at the dance. The prom has succeeded as a plot device for decades because, over the twentieth century, high school came to dominate the American adolescent experience and prom became a near-universal feature of high school social life. Audience members could relate on-screen developments to their own high school years as a defining stage in identity formation and sympathize with characters' frustrations at navigating student social hierarchies or dealing with teenage hormones.

Prom occupies a unique place in American society as one of few public rites of passage that are widely shared. In contrast, losing one's virginity is unlikely to happen publicly, in front of a group of one's peers, teachers, and parents, although knowledge of the event may later spread. Other significant milestones, such as getting one's driver's license or turning the legal drinking age, are dependent on individual birthdays and do not occur for an entire cohort on the same day at different high schools across the nation. Debutante balls, which proms are often compared to, only involve a small percentage of America's young women and their escorts. The prom is thus a distinctive ritual, and its history offers a singular perspective on changing understandings of the passage from youth to adulthood and the role of the high school in that transition.

High school students began holding proms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and they soon elevated it to ritual status. Student publications repeatedly referred to the event as the climax of one's school career. Many students in this period would have understood high school as the last stage of their formal education before entering the world of adults. High school had prolonged the protections of childhood into adolescence in order to further educate and better prepare them for adulthood. Prom offered students a way to process this transition and to try on aspects of adulthood amid the safety of their peers and school environment. The intensity of students' peer culture facilitated the development of youth's own conceptions of adulthood, and their incorporation of these conceptions into their prom traditions helped solidify the prom's importance as a rite of passage in the period leading up to World War II. The attributes and skills prized by youth sometimes differed from those valued by their adult teachers and administrators, and thus the temporary adulthood offered by prom demonstrated students' youth even as students looked to act grown-up.

Prom's emergence as an annual high school tradition occurred as public secondary education in the United States was becoming more extensive and inclusive. Schooling increasingly structured a young person's life and placed students in a peer society. A vibrant student culture had been a time-honored tradition at private colleges and the handful of high schools in existence, but the doors of those institutions had only been open to a privileged few during the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The expansion of public high schools beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century allowed more and more youth to experience and contribute to this culture. Parents from the middle and then working classes

began to see a high school education as an aid in social mobility, and they enrolled their children in ever-greater numbers. By 1930, a majority of high-school aged youth were attending secondary schools and enrollments continued to increase in the following decades. At that time in Western society, this expansion of public secondary education was unique to the United States; European nations did not begin making secondary education more widely accessible until after WWII. In the United States, as more youth prolonged their time in school, student culture in high schools became ever more significant to the wider youth culture.

In grouping youth of the same age together, high schools served as incubators for a national youth culture. While there were other strains of youth culture beyond the walls of the school building, such as the activities of urban working youth who did not attend school, high schools provided a structure for the transmission of student culture across different parts of the country. Students learned about social activities at other schools through nationwide exchanges of school newspapers. They paid particular attention to activities spawned by schools and colleges that were perceived to be more elite, and they sought to bring their own schools up to that level of sophistication. This aspiration toward elite customs suggests students' own awareness of the goal of social mobility. College and high school students participated in a national conversation about the development of their culture and standardized the types of school activities, including proms.

Adult acceptance and eventual embrace of the prom was also necessary for its survival and growth. School administrators, teachers, and parents were directly involved in supervising students' activities, and they saw reasons to foster the prom. Their influence over the prom is not to be underestimated. Advertisers, businessmen, and magazine writers saw potential profits in commercializing the prom, and their ads, products, and articles contributed to how students experienced the prom, particularly after World War II. While these adults were initially responding to a tradition of student culture that took hold nationally, they then came to actively influence that tradition. These adults' involvement shows how prom expanded beyond merely the concern of youth to become an American cultural institution, especially as successive generations went through high school and had prom experiences of their own. Still, this dissertation addresses the history of the prom primarily from the viewpoint of high school students and how they mainly shaped the adoption of prom traditions. This dissertation argues that prom was an outgrowth of youth culture, and while students had to gain adult permission and cooperation, adults did not drive the development of prom or impose the prom upon students. Youth created the culture in high schools that was receptive to the traditions of prom.

Chief among those traditions was the prom's affiliation with a class year, typically junior or senior year. The class year was simultaneously a cohort and a milestone in the standard student life cycle; editorials in support of class spirit and mentions of class rivalries ran frequently in student publications during the couple of decades before World War II. Colleges and Midwestern high schools tended to focus on the junior prom whereas high schools on the East and West Coast generally paid most attention to the senior prom. The prom took its name from the promenade that occurred when student couples made an organized procession across the dance floor. This promenade was an integral part of the evening's program, and it was led by the prom chairman, or the prom king and queen. Where the selection of prom royalty took place, it became a time-honored tradition, but it was not a custom practiced everywhere. Finally, compared with the other events held throughout the school year, the prom was traditionally a formal event, and that formality lent added significance to the prom.

This dissertation's focus on youth and these traditions has allowed me to dispel the assumption that proms were emulations of debutante balls. While the balls and proms have had similar purposes as rites of passage, the events have different origins. Whereas debutante balls stemmed from families' desires to present their daughters to society and officially introduce them to the right set of partners, the prom was an outgrowth of the culture created by students in their educational institutions. Students may have felt similar feelings of debuting themselves as adults at their prom, but proms were not designed in imitation of debutante balls.

Instead, my research shows that the prom's origins are better understood as coming from a long line of college student traditions. Despite serving as a rite of passage for generations of high school students, the prom did not have that connotation for the college students who originated the tradition; they viewed proms as a celebration of their youthful campus lives rather than a preparation for their adult futures. My dissertation begins in the 1850s at Yale where proms grew from student pranks that were initially kept secret from adult administrators. Students there and on other campuses defied or fought against adult authorities to promote this student tradition. As my first chapter demonstrates, college students were interested in carving out an autonomous space for proms in their university, but they did not speak of the prom as a transitional rite. They were more occupied with the prom as part of a nationally converging collegiate culture. The prom underscores how students at different campuses looked to emulate their peers at tonier institutions. Thus student culture not only radiated horizontally, by spreading across the country, but also spread vertically as students favored adopting customs from more prestigious schools. College proms prospered from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century as students felt the tradition reflected their youth culture, but the tradition withered as students in the 1950s felt the event had not kept pace with how their culture had evolved.

Prom only gained status as a rite of passage after being adopted as an annual tradition by high school students near the turn of the twentieth century, and my next three chapters explore how these students linked elements of the prom to adulthood. Chapter Two examines the ties that high school students constructed between social dancing and their aspirations for adulthood in the decades prior to World War II. School dances were an intrinsic part of the college culture that high school students mimicked. In adopting aspects of campus culture, these younger students demonstrated not just an awe of the older students' ostensible adulthood, but also an eagerness to taste the privilege of university life. When students sought to expand opportunities for dancing at their schools, they cited the importance of mastering this skill to assimilating into the higher social status they hoped to reach as adults. Dancing was part of the successful future that they envisioned for themselves. Organizing and holding dances empowered students with feelings of responsibility and authority, and gave them standing to negotiate with adults. Dancing also offered students a path to celebrity, which allowed students to imagine themselves as socialites or matinee idols, in addition to aiding them more immediately in dating and gaining popularity. Prom's emergence as a rite of passage fit with students' associations of dancing with adulthood and social status.

The very expense of prom encapsulated the adulthood that youth conceived for themselves; youth looked forward to a prosperous future in which they had formal social obligations. Formality was so intrinsic to the prom that, as I show in Chapter Three, even during the hardships of the Great Depression, there were students who insisted that the prom continue to retain its level of formality despite precluding other students from participating. Students were split on this issue, but formality persisted because of the adulthood it conferred. Similarly, during

World War II, students believed in the importance of the prom as a promise for the joys of adulthood that boys could return to after the war. Prom owed its perpetuation through these difficult times to its role as a rehearsal for the adulthood that youth anticipated.

In the Milwaukee area, spirited campaigns to become prom king occupied high school students in the months leading up to prom. Students there elected only a king, who later announced his choice for queen. My fourth chapter argues that these prom king elections further reveal the ties young people created between adulthood and leadership and the importance youth placed on autonomy. In selecting their prom king, students sought candidates whose traits spoke not only to their leadership abilities but also to their masculinity. While faculty advisors imposed rules requiring candidates to have good grades, students believed that social factors contributed greatly to leadership and would aid in future success. The prom king contests also showed how students valued their autonomy in carrying out their traditions. When teachers and school administrators attempted to regulate these campaigns, students refused to accept certain restrictions on their behavior and compelled the adults to reach a compromise with them.

While adult cooperation had always been key to high school proms, in the postwar era adults took on noticeably more accommodating stances toward prom. Editors at the helm of popular magazines, community leaders, and advertisers all found reasons to lend their support to the prom. This dissertation concludes by looking at how these adults sought to influence the proms by injecting their ideas of responsibility and courtesy, but they also couched their messages in sympathetic tones to appeal to students. Unlike earlier generations who held these positions, enough time had passed since the vast expansion of public high school education for these adults to have grown up with proms of their own. This heightened interest by adults in the prom thus reflected their memories of their own youth but also their generation's definition of adulthood.

Much of this dissertation relies on students' voices as captured in their school newspapers and yearbooks. These publications offer the best access to high school youths' voices, and I examined yearbooks and student newspapers at different high schools in San Francisco, Milwaukee, and Baltimore spanning the years 1890 to 1970. I chose these three cities in order to compare students' attitudes and experiences across different regions of the United States. I focused on urban areas because their concentrated populations built public high schools earlier than rural regions where people were more dispersed. For example, the founding of America's first three public high schools took place in Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This third high school, Baltimore City College, was established in 1839 and is included in this dissertation. Its name speaks to the nineteenth-century idea that high school would serve as the "people's college," and it remained an all-male institution during the period covered by my study. Baltimore maintained separate high schools for boys and girls even after building its first coeducational high school in the 1920s. The high schools of San Francisco and Milwaukee were coeducational throughout the same time period. In addition, San Francisco and Milwaukee student bodies were mainly white for the first half of the twentieth century, while Baltimore schools were explicitly segregated by race. I had hoped to gain insight into the prom experiences of students at Baltimore's African-American high school, but the few yearbooks held in the school's library offered scant details of student life, probably reflecting the lack of funding for black student publications and activities.

I had not expected that my research on high schools would reach back into the nineteenth century, but I found that a Milwaukee high school had its first prom in 1893. At that time, student writing took the form of monthly literary magazines or quarterlies with numerous short

stories and poems. By the 1920s in all three cities, students adopted the broadsheet format and focused on journalism rather than fiction. Most schools printed issues every two weeks through the 1950s; these several decades seem to have been a golden age of student newspapers. Starting in the late 1950s and 1960s, a number of student newspapers began to decrease in quality, with fewer articles written, a shrunken paper size, and a less-frequent publishing schedule. I had initially decided to take my research up to 1970 because I anticipated a decline in student enthusiasm for the prom due to the rise in student activism during the 1960s. While this protest culture may help explain the deterioration of student journalism, either because budding reporters turned their attention elsewhere or because teachers were anxious about providing too much space for student opinions, the mainstream tradition of the prom seemed to continue apace in these three cities. Still, due to this period's lighter coverage in student newspapers, my dissertation mostly draws on pre-1960 material.

These sources also have other limitations. Students selected article topics and wrote about their school events, but their publications were certainly mediated by adult faculty advisors. Teachers would have exercised influence over what was printed, even when they did not actively censor students. Students who made up the yearbook and newspaper staffs were likely to desire adult approval, or at least avoid disapproval, so these students were not necessarily representative of the larger student body. As much as possible, I have looked to student newspapers for measures of student body participation and mentions of disagreement or dissent. Furthermore, even though these publications provide information about how students socialized in public spaces, they offer less insight into what students did in private. Despite these limitations, these sources provide the best possible opening into student life. Students used their publications to recap school events, to editorialize, and to comment on their peers, and the prom captured a significant amount of their attention.

In researching college proms, I largely mirrored the geographical range of my high school research and also examined elite private colleges where proms originated. Thus my research on the East Coast took me to Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, and also to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. I also drew from archives at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the Milwaukee Normal School (which became the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin) and Marquette University, a Catholic institution in Milwaukee. This span of institutions showed what appealed to college students about the prom and how they related to their peers at other institutions. While I mainly examined the yearbooks and student newspapers at these schools, the administrative records at Yale showed what the administration thought about the prom and particularly their involvement in it after World War II.

For further evidence of how students' proms played a role in the national youth culture, I turned to publications such as *Seventeen*, *Scholastic*, and, to a lesser extent, *Ladies' Home Journal*. Although these readings were largely prescriptive and written by adults, they were mindful of youthful audiences. *Scholastic* was distributed in schools and aimed at students of both genders; its most popular feature was the advice column, Boy Dates Girl, which began in 1936 with the pseudonym Gay Head. *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Seventeen* focused on female audiences. *Ladies' Home Journal* also ran an advice column, the Sub-Deb column, which specifically addressed the queries of younger female readers, while *Seventeen* was entirely devoted to younger readers from its founding in 1944. Despite their adult authorship, these magazines provide a sense of the national conversation between adults and youth about prom, for even as adult writers and editors sought to influence their youthful readers, they found themselves influenced by those readers.

Although the prom has been a significant feature in high school life for decades, the prom has not been the focus of much scholarly work. Amy Best, a sociologist, has written the one book about prom, *Prom Night*.¹ She includes a brief history of the prom, but her focus is on how students' prom experiences both displayed and shaped their identities during the late 1990s. She conducted numerous interviews with students at schools of different racial and socioeconomic demographics. Her history posits that proms emerged as a democratized form of the debutante ball, and she emphasizes the role of adults in promoting a middle-class agenda among the traditions of the prom despite her appreciation for how youth have resisted or subverted adults' intentions. My dissertation argues for a different evolution of the prom that places more responsibility for the event in the hands of youth. Additionally, by highlighting the participation of boys in proms during the first half of the twentieth century, my work offers historical background to understand how the modern prom became the feminine space that is depicted by Best.

Historians of youth peer culture and dating have given the prom a role in their works. In *The Damned and the Beautiful*, Paula Fass discusses how 1920s college students around the nation used participation in proms as one measure of social status, and her analysis has greatly informed my research.² My dissertation bookends her examination of the prom by tracing its initial transmission from a few college campuses to many and by following the prom through its high school iteration. Beth Bailey's examination of dating and courtship among twentieth-century youth, *From Front Porch to Backseat*, also sees prom as the site of competition, and she discusses how high school students mimicked college students' behavior.³ Her research looks at the changing conventions of dating to study how young people measured the cost of a date and understood gender roles. In addition to the relevance of her work to my research interests, her approach to her public sources has influenced my reading of high school newspapers and yearbooks.

Another historian of youth culture, Kelly Schrum argues for the importance of the pre-World War II period to the growth of youth culture in high schools. Her book, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, contends that while popular media were not necessarily aimed at youth, youth adopted and adapted popular culture materials to serve their own purposes.⁴ Schrum emphasizes the role of girls – how girls particularly adopted music, dancing, and fashion to create the youth culture we often identify with the postwar era – but my research into the prom reveals how both male and female students contributed to youth culture through school activities. My dissertation shares Schrum's interest in locating the evolution of postwar youth culture from an earlier student culture, and my work follows this process a step farther by demonstrating how this earlier student culture expanded its reach beyond the school and into the wider culture of postwar America.

Another relevant vein of scholarly research has discussed how high schools served to disseminate middle-class values among their students and offered the promise of social mobility. Sociologists, such as Robert and Helen Lynd and August Hollingshead, probed youth's awareness of social class and how they replicated the social class of their parents within their

¹ Amy Best, *Prom Night: Youth, Schools, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

² Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

³ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Backseat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988).

⁴ Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

schools.⁵ Historians have also studied how high schools combined students of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Reed Ueda's *Avenues to Adulthood* situated the origins of the nineteenth-century high school in its community by focusing on Somerville, Massachusetts, and followed how high schools contributed to social mobility.⁶ He addresses the city's shifting demographics from Yankee to immigrant, and describes how the resulting mixed high school environment led to a peer society that was concerned with their future advancement into the turn of the century. Historian Stephen Lassonde examines the tensions between working-class Italian immigrants and the Protestant-led school administrations in early twentieth-century New Haven, Connecticut. The way that high school extended adolescence and protected childhood was an imposition on these immigrant families. In discussing how immigrant youth were introduced to new values in school, his work *Learning to Forget* emphasizes both the influence of the school and of their peers.⁷ My dissertation draws from these works a view of high schools as promoters of middle-class values and of students as aware of the challenges of advancement. I argue that youth developed their proms to reflect their own ambitions for achieving a higher class status in adulthood, which was in line with the goals of adult authorities. At the same time, youth constructed their understandings of class and adulthood within their peer environment. One of the facts of high school life that is difficult to appreciate today is how much high school students expected that this schooling would be the basis for social mobility. Today as college seems to be the only road to success, it is helpful to rethink the history of high schools, and the prom offers a way to understand how students of the time thought of this experience.

The phrase "rite of passage" comes from Arnold van Gennep, a French ethnographer. He observed that "the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. ... For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined."⁸ These ceremonies are rites of passage. The prom does not always serve as a definitive break with youth, particularly when it occurs in the junior year, but it does serve as a transitional ceremony to close out one's youth and to imagine the future that is to come. Vendela Vida, known best as a novelist and editor of *The Believer*, explored modern-day coming-of-age rituals for young women ranging from debutante balls to joining a girl gang in her book, *Girls on the Verge*.⁹ She posits that young women particularly are looking for rites both to declare and to shape their identities. While her research is contemporary, her insights have proved helpful in considering the complexity of youth's desires. Her work also helps us to appreciate how their eager anticipation of adulthood often reflects their optimism. Even as youth looked to adulthood in constructing the prom, they were unmistakably young.

The prom has served as a rite of passage for legions of high school students in twentieth century America, and its history provides a unique path to understanding how American youth approached their transition into adulthood. High school students saw themselves as completing a

⁵ Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929); August Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth and Elmtown Revisited* (New York: Wiley, 1975).

⁶ Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).

⁷ Stephen Lassonde, *Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven's Working Class, 1870-1940* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).

⁸ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

⁹ Vendela Vida, *Girls on the Verge: Debutante Dips, Gang Drive-bys, and Other Initiations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

final stage of youth, and they invested the prom with their ideas of what adulthood might bring. They drew from a widely-held perception of high school as a gateway to social mobility as well as from the values of their narrower peer society in constructing their prom traditions. In doing so, they created a rite of passage that projected their desired futures as adults but was also grounded in their youth.

Chapter 1

The Rise and Fall of the College Prom

In 1916, students at Marquette University decided to resume holding a prom after a four-year hiatus. The campus newspaper lent its support with an editorial:

Once, and only once, is the average man in position to attend anything of this kind, and it is an affair which he will remember for the rest of his days. In a year or two at most he will be engaged in what we are pleased to call the 'battle of life', which usually consists of 'buying the baby's shoes' and will have little time to think of such things as Proms.¹

The author understood that college years were fleeting, and boosted the prom as a symbol of this carefree period before having to face adult challenges and responsibilities. While the high school prom became an important rite of passage, the collegiate version was more of a last hurrah than a ceremony for easing the transition from youth to adulthood. For students at this Catholic university in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the only purpose that their prom would serve in adulthood was as a treasured memory of youth.

Marquette students' memories would be filled with their own handiwork. The revival of the prom that year was entirely due to students. While they did need to gain the approval of adult administrators, students initiated the formation of committees and planned the event. As a cohort, they selected a prom chairman and debated the costs and level of formality. Organizers appealed to their classmates to attend and make the prom a success. The editorial from 1916 continued by urging students to attend the prom, "If we do [turn out], the Marquette Junior Prom will be a thing to command respect and attention of other schools."² In undertaking these efforts, students did not just aim to create an enjoyable and memorable event for themselves, but they also hoped their prom would make an impression on others.

This outward-looking perspective showed students from the early-twentieth century already engaging in a national youth culture, of which prom was a significant symbol. Students were concerned about how the reputation of their university compared with others, and they wanted Marquette to come off well. They believed that this prom would help them belong to the collegiate world. After the prom was held, another editorial pronounced:

Marquette has re-entered the family of universities. After several years of uncertainty she is again experiencing those symptoms which are peculiar to universities. She had a real football team, a half million dollars assures a gymnasium, she has an annual and is to have a school newspaper. And now she is to have the one thing which will fledge her – a Junior Prom. Take these things into consideration together with frats, professors and a few classes. Do they not constitute a university?³

¹ H.R., "Junior Prom," *The Marquette College Journal*, February 1916, 17.

² Ibid.

³ "The Prom Redeems Marquette," *The Marquette College Journal*, April 1916, 24.

From their observations of other schools, Marquette students had concluded that it was customary for a university to have certain attributes, and they believed that prom was the last necessary component in bringing their school up to par. Professors and classes, with an emphasis on there being only a “few,” were an afterthought despite being the ostensible reason to attend a university. Prom had become a capstone of university life because students had made it one; youth were judging themselves and their universities by the standards of their peers.

Of particular interest were the habits of students at campuses of greater prestige. Thus students viewed colleges as existing within a social hierarchy, and proms spread from the Ivy League to the large public universities and then to smaller institutions. In their aspirations to keep up with trends in campus life, students corresponded with peers at other institutions and exchanged school publications which told of recent social activities. By looking to their peers as social arbiters, college students did not confuse proms with their adult futures. They organized and attended the prom because it served their present needs, whether it was to fulfill commonly-held expectations of university life or to enjoy a formal dance.

If students were responsible for initiating the prom, they were also responsible for its demise. In the late 1950s, students at colleges around the nation began turning away from the prom as a central part of their university experience. The postwar expansion of higher education following the GI Bill brought a more socioeconomically diverse student population to university campuses. Ivy League universities may have remained bastions of privilege, but they were not immune to these larger demographic changes in higher education. This generation of students no longer saw the prom as an expression of their culture, but as an outdated relic. Students who still championed the tradition of prom saw organizing committees fall into debt, and their efforts to update the prom failed to revive student support. Even at Yale, where administrators sought to prop up the prom by working with the few enthusiastic students, the prom ultimately succumbed to student disinterest.

In both their rise and fall, college proms illustrate how students have determined their own culture. Students were the primary forces behind the establishment of proms at universities, and while they honored some common features of a prom, they were willing to diverge from tradition and make adaptations. When the prom no longer held significance for their culture, students at various universities dropped it. The dissemination of prom and communication among students on different campuses speaks to how students looked to each other in creating a common culture of student life across the nation. Students compared their campuses to those of others and built expectations of what a college experience ought to include. Proms became a necessary part of that experience while students wanted them. For college students, proms were not a rite of passage, but a celebration of youth.

The word prom is an abbreviation of promenade. Enjoying a promenade through a garden with musical accompaniment became a popular pastime in London during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These “promenade concerts” were a predecessor of the modern-day BBC Proms, an annual concert series in London. American university students adapted the promenade concert into a dance associated with students’ class year. Each student class used the prom to celebrate its culture and the prom quickly became an opportunity for students to express their social hierarchy.

Proms’ affiliation with a class year reflected an established belief in class loyalty within a student cohort. At Yale, whose promenade was the earliest I found in my research and grew to be a standard by which other colleges measured their proms, students had developed a number of

rituals to express their shared experiences as a cohort in the nineteenth century. They often persisted in these rituals despite administrative disapproval. For example, Yale sophomores had the tradition of “burying the Euclid,” a raucous ceremony that marked the end of their studies of Euclid with burning or burying their textbooks. The faculty tried to prohibit the practice in the late 1840s, but failed. In the same vein, juniors sought to exhibit their class spirit by holding a formal ball. Although Yale’s founders had banned dancing, the administration had relaxed on this point by the nineteenth century, and the junior ball became an annual tradition.⁴

This ball was a predecessor for Yale’s first promenade concert in 1850, when students added this event to the program of the Junior Exhibition.⁵ The exhibition grew from an older tradition of oral examinations; students delivered dramatic readings or orations before parents, classmates, and university officials. Although the speakers took pains to impress the audience with their erudition, their classmates found the speeches rather dull and instead preferred the interludes when a hired band would play. According to Yale chronicler Lyman Bagg, students were responsible for the cost of the music and instituted the promenade as a fundraiser so they could hire better bands to make the exhibition tolerable.⁶ After being a sporadic feature for a decade, the promenade became a mainstay of the Exhibition during the 1860s.

However, there is very little description of the Exhibition’s promenade concerts because students associated more strongly with the promenade concert that grew out of a parody of the Junior Exhibition.⁷ The Spoon Promenade emerged in 1861 to accompany the Wooden Spoon Ceremony, an evening when juniors exchanged inside jokes and mocked the seriousness of the Exhibition with speeches on topics such as “The Indeorepulsiveness of Capillaceous Substances if Electrolyzed by Catenariel and Grinestonical Agencies.”⁸ Whereas the junior exhibition was held in concert with adult faculty, the Spoon Ceremony originated completely within the student body and was initially kept secret from the administration.

The Spoon Ceremony began in 1847 when junior Henry Taylor Blake suggested the class adopt a Cambridge University tradition of calling the lowest-ranked student on the honors list the Wooden Spoon.⁹ This adoption of another school’s tradition is just one example of how students followed the activities of their peers at other institutions and participated in an exchange of campus cultures. Instead of receiving letter grades, students were ranked. The Wooden Spoon would have held a rank that was “barely above average,” but as archivist Judith Ann Schiff explains, “singling him out was the sort of prank that appealed to the student body’s sense of the ridiculous.”¹⁰ Thus students imparted their own sense of fun on the academic hierarchy determined by their professors and the stuffiness of the Exhibitions.

Within two years, the students abandoned the premise of tying the Wooden Spoon to a man based on his academic standing and turned the selection into a popularity contest. This erosion of whatever influence adults might have had over the outcome, in that the faculty assigned honors, made this truly a student event. Instead of academic rank, fraternity

⁴ Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 221.

⁵ Lyman Bagg, *Four Years at Yale* (New Haven: C.C. Chatfield & Co., 1871), 664. Bagg says the first promenade was held by the class of 1851 whereas Kelley says the first promenade was in 1851.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 651-652.

⁷ Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 221.

⁸ Bagg, *Four Years at Yale*, 417.

⁹ In *Yale Yesterdays*, Clarence Deming disagrees, claiming that the spoon went to the biggest eater in Commons. Bagg also notes that rewarding this eater was a custom but declares that the wooden spoon of the promenades was from this Cambridge tradition.

¹⁰ Judith Ann Schiff, “Old Yale: Secrets of the Spoons,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, February 1995, 96.

membership became the greatest factor in the selection of the Wooden Spoon, also known as the Spoon Man, and eight or nine additional men who would form the Spoon Committee.¹¹ The majority of the junior class belonged to one of three fraternities, Alpha Delta Phi, Psi Upsilon, and Delta Kappa Epsilon, and these three groups soon dominated the committee and divided the positions among themselves. These fraternities enforced a social hierarchy by controlling access to these coveted positions, and a hierarchy existed within the committee with Spoon Man being the most prestigious position. Committee membership came at a real financial cost; members took turns providing a spread or wine party for their meetings, and the Spoon Man was expected to host the most lavish party of all. As Lyman Bagg noted, “A poor man, in short, could not afford to accept the office, and therefore, however well liked he might be, he never expected his classmates to confer upon him this costly mark of their esteem.”¹² Being on the Spoon Committee was a mark of social status and wealth, and a step toward selection for a senior society.

In those same two years, the Spoon Ceremony went from being a secret prank to a formal public event open to faculty and women.¹³ Even as the committee sought to bring in outsiders and provide a window into student life through dramatic plays, members still privileged their classmates: “The [student] tickets were elaborately engraved with class monograms, spoon ornaments, and the like. . . . The programmes distributed among the audience, however, were of the plainest possible description.”¹⁴ In 1861, the Spoon Promenade further involved the public in veneration of student life. The promenade took place the evening before the ceremony and added to the growing expense of the increasingly elaborate ceremony; costs ballooned over the course of the 1860s from \$300 to \$1,000. The committee financed these events through ticket sales as well as the institution of junior dues ranging from \$5 to \$25.¹⁵ The attendance at the official Junior Exhibition Promenade was soon eclipsed by the Spoon Promenade – as Bagg wrote, “the superior and constantly increasing attractions of the latter celebration having rather deadened the interest in the former, in much the same way as the Spoon Presentation itself had taken away all glory from the Junior Exhibition.”¹⁶ The popularity of these Spoon events further enhanced the Committee’s social status, which surely helped its members compel classmates to pay dues. While the Spoon Committee advertised the promenade around town, it retained an interest in showing off student culture by having the Yale Glee Club provide the concert portion of the promenade. After their performance, which would have included songs associated with the school, the dancing would begin.

Despite the popularity of the Spoon Ceremony and Promenade, the Spoon Committee met its demise in 1871. First, dissatisfaction in the student body erupted when a few students requested that a professor, James Hadley, assign the abolition of the wooden spoon as a composition subject. Hadley thought this topic was silly, but was surprised when “almost the whole class poured into the room and overflowed into the entry to hear half a dozen writers by agreement attack the Spoon system without gloves.”¹⁷ Editorials followed in the student publication, the *Yale Courant*. This protest over the Spoon Committee underscores how

¹¹ The Latin name of the Spoon Committee was Cochleareati, which was often shortened to Coch, with puns based on pronouncing a hard “ch.”

¹² Bagg, *Four Years at Yale*, 409.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 421.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 665.

¹⁷ Clarence Deming, *Yale Yesterdays* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1915), 90.

significant it had become in student life and also students' discontent with the social hierarchy it represented. Next, rivalries between fraternities grew so tense that Delta Kappa Epsilon caused a stir by abruptly withdrawing its members from Committee elections.¹⁸ Finally, the faculty and administration rescheduled a senior event, Presentation Day, to cut into the day of the Spoon Promenade. However divided students were, they refused to recognize the effective abolition of their promenade by the faculty. A compromise was eventually reached with the faculty, and instead of a "Spoon Promenade," students would hold a "Regatta Ball" on the evening of Presentation Day. A new committee for planning the ball included two students from each academic class in the traditional liberal arts course, and two from the Sheffield Scientific School, which was the relatively new science and engineering arm of Yale, for a total of ten members.¹⁹ Although the compromise removed juniors from reigning over the promenade, they were still able to hold a public dramatic exhibition around Presentation Day, and they eventually wrested back control over the school's dance. The Junior Promenade Committee grew out of this Regatta Ball and each successive class continued to organize its promenade and pass the wooden spoon down through the prom chairmen. The Yale Prom was the surviving legacy of the Spoon Ceremony.

The origins of the Yale Prom show how deeply rooted the event was in student culture. The importation of the idea for the Spoon Ceremony from Cambridge University demonstrates students' interest in the customs created by peers at other institutions. Yale students put their own stamp on the selection of the Spoon Man; they inscribed their social hierarchy on the process by favoring fraternity members and popularity, and their ceremonies were given over to humorous presentations of student life. The Spoon Promenade was a further display of students' social status and eclipsed the promenade associated with the official Junior Exhibition. The survival of the Spoon Promenade as the Junior Promenade was a testament to students' determination to gain recognition for their culture and to continue a tradition that had become important to them.

In the next several decades leading up to World War I, as Yale students embellished their prom with added social events, the concept of prom attracted the attention of students at other universities who also began to adopt the prom as an annual tradition. This transmission of the prom shows the breadth of students' correspondence and their keen interest in the goings-on of their peers, especially those peers at prestigious Ivy League institutions. At schools such as the University of Wisconsin, student proponents of the prom struggled, not only to gain adult acceptance of the prom's suitability for public universities, but also to convince their classmates that they could afford and relate to this Eastern elite custom. Yet, even though students' experiences differed across a great number of universities, a consensus about the defining features of a prom emerged as part of a national collegiate culture.

At Yale, the prom reached new heights of extravagance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of students' continued regard for class spirit. The loss of the Spoon Committee may have spurred juniors to further reclaim the promenade by holding it in February rather than attaching it to the seniors' Presentation Day in July. Prom thus became its own event. The formality and excess pursued by earlier classes became more extreme as each successive class sought to outdo the previous year's prom; classes sought to leave their mark by tacking on new festivities to the prom, which eventually turned into an extended weekend whirlwind. Until

¹⁸ Bagg, *Four Years at Yale*, 422.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

1893, students began the Prom Weekend on Saturday and continued until Wednesday with the actual Prom on Wednesday night. Students technically still had to go to their classes on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, but pursued prom-related events in the evenings.²⁰ That year, however, the faculty sought to contain students' frivolity and shorten the social season by compelling students to hold the prom on Tuesday night rather than Wednesday. Students acceded to the faculty but responded by working to fit "the various teas and receptions and small germans which are a part of the social machinery of the season" into the preceding Saturday and Sunday, and squeeze "the regular functions, the Glee Club concert, the Senior, Junior, and Sophomore germans" into Monday and Tuesday.²¹ While germans were a popular type of dance, students still saw the prom as "the grand climax." In an expression of students' social hierarchy, which honored seniority, sophomores and seniors remained welcome, but freshmen were excluded. These proms lasted from 9pm to 2 or 3am, and they featured different types of dances, with lancers, waltzes, and gallops being the most popular forms. Students were quite devoted to the hectic schedule that they had devised. One student, Winfred Young, recalled of his prom in 1912, "I danced thirty-nine out of the forty-two dances, and could have danced more."²²

The rising opulence of the prom perpetuated the influence of money on a student's place in the social hierarchy. To participate in the latest dances, students such as Winfred Young paid to take dance classes on their own time. The practice of holding teas for one's friends also demanded that a student be able to purchase a nice selection of food and drink. Young gave a four-hour long Sunday tea for nineteen people with fruit salad, nut-bread and rye-bread sandwiches, chocolate, ice cream with a decorative Yale Y, and four kinds of cakes, candy and nuts.²³ During this period though, alcohol was not a main expense for Yale hosts during prom time. In the 1910s, no alcohol was served at the prom directly and visiting girls were more likely to shun alcohol as temperance views grew in prevalence. Moreover, although Yale undergraduates enjoyed drinking at establishments such as Mory's, drinking was not yet a mainstay of fraternity life since Yale's students had not yet built fraternity houses.²⁴

Yale students had many ways of knowing how much money their classmates possessed and also ways to show off their own finances. The placement of boxes in the prom's ballroom also allowed for students to express their wealth. Since couples would sit in these boxes when they were not dancing, having a box was quite desirable. The prom committee auctioned them off, and boxes with better locations cost more. Students were also responsible for furnishing their boxes themselves, so they could demonstrate their wealth with the quality of their furniture and decorations and possibly the hiring of a private butler.²⁵ These aspects of the prom allowed for money to be a means of displaying oneself prominently and emphasized the desirability of wealth to status.

Adding to these expenses, each student was also expected to pay for the travel and lodging expenses of his female guest and her chaperone. Some of these girls lived locally in New Haven while others took trains from nearby cities to attend the prom; some were prominent New York debutantes and a number of girls were students at tony women's colleges or sisters of

²⁰ Loomis Havemeyer, *Out of Yale's Past* (New Haven: n.p., 1960), 30.

²¹ Lewis Sheldon Welch and Walter Camp, *Yale: Her Campus, Class-Rooms, and Athletics* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1899), 69.

²² Winfred Young to Marion L. Bradley, 1 February 1912, Yale Miscellaneous Manuscripts, MS 1258, No. 262, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Havemeyer, *Out of Yale's Past*, 32.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

classmates. These girls received the most commented-upon display of wealth: flowers. Yale men competed to outdo their classmates with the size and cost of their bouquets until the faculty finally banned the giving of flowers.²⁶ The authors of one Yale history concluded in 1899, “As long as there are young men sent to college with unlimited allowances or with special privileges of drafts for special occasions, the work of keeping their money in their pockets will always be difficult.”²⁷ Students’ ability to participate in the prom depended on their having a certain amount of wealth, and the prom made their finances visible by their placement in boxes and their gifts of flowers. The prom sharpened their awareness of their financial status relative to those of their classmates.

During the late nineteenth century, the prom garnered interest from other classes at Yale and other collegiate institutions. At Yale, senior classes began holding their own promenade concerts in the 1880s and thus revived the tradition of having a promenade during graduation festivities in June. Students at the Sheffield Scientific School, which was part of Yale but still separate from the “academic” Yale College, sought to be included in prom committees. Although they could attend the event, they had had no voice in the prom’s planning after the two seats that were assigned them in the 1871 Regatta Ball.²⁸ Sheffield students made the case that prom was part of Yale’s larger program of education and argued that, under the current system, they were suffering “taxation without representation.”²⁹ They reminded the liberal arts students of Sheffield’s vital role in the prom weekend. Yale College students had often relied upon the Sheffield fraternities, which did have houses unlike the fraternities of academic students, for spaces to entertain their female guests. The Sheffield houses also hosted teas and dances throughout the weekend; Saturday night’s Germans were known as the Sheffield dances.³⁰ Despite resistance from Yale College students who wanted to maintain control of the prom and debate over which Sheffield class year was equivalent to the academic junior year, Sheffield students gained committee seats during the 1890s and eventually received equal representation with Yale College in 1919.³¹ The development of the senior prom and struggles for recognition by Sheffield students illustrate how Yale men viewed prom as a significant expression of their collegiate experience.

Students at other colleges also had class activities, and the prom appealed to them as another expression of class spirit. Princeton had begun holding a Sophomore Reception in 1877 in which sophomores held a dance for the graduating seniors as well as other classes and alumni.³² Typically, the dance began at 11 p.m., featured an orchestra playing for sixteen or more dances, and could last until dawn.³³ One student Henry Clay Stewart wrote to his father in 1883, “We went to the Sophomore reception last night and danced until broad daylight.”³⁴ Juniors began to organize a promenade concert as early as 1883 when Stewart was elected to a junior

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Welch and Camp, *Yale: Her Campus, Class-Rooms, and Athletics*, 70-71.

²⁸ Ibid., 66.

²⁹ Ibid., 67. Also, see Havemeyer, *Out of Yale’s Past*, 28.

³⁰ Havemeyer, *Out of Yale’s Past*, 32.

³¹ Ibid., 28.

³² “Junior Prom Time-Honored Institution; Boasts Continuous Operation Since 1885,” *The Princetonian*, 20 March 1936, in Historical Subject Files, Box 386, Student Life: Dances, Princeton University Archives, Princeton.

³³ Ben Primer to Eustace W. Buchanan, 5 June 1993, Historical Subject Files, Box 386, Student Life: Dances, Princeton University Archives, Princeton.

³⁴ Henry Clay Stewart to his father, 20 June 1883, Henry Clay Stewart Collection, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton.

class committee to present such an event at commencement.³⁵ A formal Princeton Junior Prom then grew out of these class events beginning in 1885. As at Yale, Princeton juniors surrounded their prom with additional festivities. Another student Alexander Marshall Thompson wrote to his father in 1890, “The Junior Promenade and just before it the glee club concert, took place last week. I went to the glee club and it was good. The other was over at 6 AM in the morning. But that is tautology.”³⁶ He wrote to someone else a year later, “The Junior Prom came off last week and was a very fashionable affair. Mrs. Wanamaker, and all the swell people of New York and Philadelphia were there. It cost over \$1000. I have been feeling in fine condition for the last three or four days.”³⁷

The prom soon reached the Midwest where students at the public and coeducational University of Wisconsin in Madison began their prom tradition in 1895. The prom quickly grew from an event of 250 people in its first year to 600 people a decade later in 1905.³⁸ Just as East Coast proms had become more elaborate and costly, the 1905 prom set a record for the most money spent on a Wisconsin prom. That year’s event cost \$1000 for decorating the drill and gymnasium room and additional money was spent on the musicians. A student newspaper article stated that Madison students had adopted the practice of serving supper in boxes lining the ballroom walls from eastern universities.³⁹ This reference again suggests that correspondence about proms was occurring between different colleges and shows that students were looking to the traditions established on other campuses to develop a prototypical prom. They would have seen how other schools’ proms were becoming more opulent and sought to keep pace.

Although the prom seemed to have successfully taken hold as an annual tradition, its growing lavishness troubled a number of constituencies in Madison. Student supporters of the prom faced questioning from faculty, classmates, and the general public as to whether the prom really suited this Midwestern community. Prom proponents struggled to redefine the event in a way that addressed these groups’ concerns but still maintained the distinctive qualities of a prom. The Madison prom had not started as an exclusively undergraduate event. Students organized it, but a woman who attended the school’s first prom later recalled, “The university was limited in enrollment in those days and outsiders were welcome to help in making the party a success. Townspeople also paid to be given the permission to sit in the balcony of the old gym to watch the prom.”⁴⁰ Local adults’ participation in this event seemed to offer their tacit acceptance, but they particularly disapproved of the costs of proms. Attending a state university, students were concerned about public reaction to perceived extravagance, and they tried to downplay that aspect of the prom. In addition, the student body of Madison, though still relatively privileged, was less rarefied than Yale’s, and it was more sensitive to pricing. Prom organizers’ attempts to tackle costs reflected both a desire to make the prom accessible to the Wisconsin student population as well as an effort to gain approval from adults, who frowned on the frivolity of

³⁵ Henry Clay Stewart to his father, 24 March 1883, Henry Clay Stewart Collection, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton.

³⁶ Alexander Marshall Thompson to his father, 16 February 1890, Alexander Marshall Thompson Letters, Box 1, Folder 2, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton.

³⁷ Alexander Marshall Thompson to Huston, 8 February 1891, Alexander Marshall Thompson Letters, Box 1 Folder 3, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton.

³⁸ “First Queen Tells of Her Prom King,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 1; “Junior Prom a Brilliant Event,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 18 February 1905, 8.

³⁹ “Junior Prom a Brilliant Event,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 18 February 1905, 8.

⁴⁰ “First Queen Tells of Her Prom King,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 1.

proms. These students sought to adapt the dance into a form that would complement the Madison community but still be recognizable as a prom.

Students met together to discuss a more moderate prom in 1908. Fraternity men agreed that year to suggestions by the student conference committee for a “prom which shall be free from social excesses.”⁴¹ The desire to secure fraternities’ cooperation speaks to the influence fraternity men had on campus affairs and their prominence in the school’s social hierarchy. Relieving the prom of this excess meant that students coming from nearby would not use carriages, and that flowers would not be given to prom guests. The campus newspaper, *The Daily Cardinal*, stated, “The resolutions show further that the true nature of the prom has been misrepresented to the people of the state. They maintain that the average prom expenses of each student are about \$30, that carriage expenses are low, and that favors are presented for their sentimental rather than their intrinsic value.”⁴² Students felt they needed to justify their expenses for prom to adult observers in the general public and argue for a reinterpretation of what defined a prom.

These steps to decrease prom expenses found approval among the faculty, which was pleased to see students’ initiative in recognizing “the importance of moderation and simplicity in their social affairs and in eliminating by their own regulations many of the practices which have produced needless expense and have subjected the function to criticism.” Interestingly, the pleasure that the faculty took in students’ moderation led them to agree to a price increase for prom tickets that same year. Prom organizers had petitioned the faculty committee on social affairs to raise the price from three dollars to five dollars. Somehow, the faculty seemed to believe that acceding to this price increase did not conflict with their hope “to check what they considered a growing tendency in university social life toward extravagance and to keep social functions on a plane of reasonable simplicity and moderation.”⁴³ Students’ ability to convince faculty of their intentions towards moderation, even while raising ticket prices, suggests a level of student autonomy in determining plans for prom. Although students did need to gain the university’s acceptance of the event, the prom remained grounded in students’ desires.

Perhaps the faculty’s calls for moderation were more about having to answer to the general public, which was not yet won over. As a public university, the Madison campus was under the oversight of state politicians. In 1913, members of the Wisconsin Senate debated bills to abolish fraternities from the university and to abolish class dances and prohibit them from being held in university or state buildings. The latter bill was clearly aimed at the prom, which was occasionally held in the Capitol building.⁴⁴ The Senate passed neither bill, but the fact that state politicians were debating these issues illustrates how student culture was being observed by a wider audience. With this adult scrutiny, students themselves sought to regulate the costs and make the event more democratic.

Students’ concerns about lowering costs were not merely about gaining adult acceptance of the event, but also reflected their own ambivalence about the need for an elaborate prom. In a student forum, Harold M. Eckhart, the president of the class of 1912 said, “The present prom is too expensive. A prom could be run for \$3 [per person], which would doubtless be within the reach of all and which, would still satisfy the need of a representative class party.” This

⁴¹ “No More Flowers For Prom Guests,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 19 December 1908, 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Society Committee Votes for \$5 Prom,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 22 December 1908, 1.

⁴⁴ “Bill No. 105S,” *The Daily Cardinal*, 19 February 1913. Also see J. Frank Cook to Roger Buettell, 15 February 1974, University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

statement articulates the view that the prom was intrinsically a celebration of one's cohort and thus the event planners should look to include the whole class. Eckhart continued to recast attending the prom as a right, "As the prom stands now, it is out of the question for a man working his way through college to attend and I believe that such students have a right to attend the social functions of their class."⁴⁵ His argument serves to show how entrenched prom had become in campus life.

Al Tormey, chairman of that year's prom, defended the diversity of prom attendance, "The price of the prom cannot be possibly reduced if the affair is to be ran [sic] as it has been for years. About one half the men attending the prom this year were not fraternity men. ... The average cost to men attending house parties was \$35 while the cost of those going only to the prom, and to the junior play should not have been over \$15."⁴⁶ Tormey argued that the prom was an established institution that needed to live up to its past glories and thus ought not to be cheapened. As proof that prom was not merely the preserve of rich fraternities, he cited that half of prom attendees were unaffiliated with a Greek organization, and he stressed that different levels of involvement allowed for more students to participate, if not participate fully.

In response, a junior, Irvin White, cannily observed that that these different levels of participation created a false sense of inclusion because students felt peer pressure to meet the highest level. "The present junior prom ... makes students think that they should sacrifice in order to attend a function that is to say the least extravagant and ostentatious. This year I know of a student who pawned his watch and sold his suit in order to attend the prom." White continued, "I would say that not only the juniors who attend the prom but every member of the class should vote for the prom chairman. The people of Madison are allowed to vote on the liquor question and it is not asked whether or not they use booze."⁴⁷

At heart, these were questions of what the prom ought to represent, in terms of the diversity of a student cohort, their Greek membership or independent status, and its tradition. While these students had varying views on the prom, none of them called for its end. Those who thought the prom was undemocratic sought instead to make it more representative, and those who did not attend the prom sought to have their voices heard. They were debating how to take a function from elite universities and adapt it to their student body so that it would suit their student culture.

These factions within the student body seemed to unite after World War I. The faculty committee on students' life was dismayed with how expensive proms had gotten during the preceding years, and the group declared the prom undemocratic and issued a statement, "The Prom has been called off!" The faculty chided, "A \$10,000 Prom with all its flowers, dress suits, and expensive gowns would look somewhat out of place at a time when so many people are having a hard time to make both ends meet."⁴⁸ Students however responded with multiple mass meetings of the men and women of the junior class. Despite whatever divisions may have existed within the student body about what a prom ought to be, prom proponents successfully portrayed the issue as students' self-government versus the faculty. Students then voted on a referendum, which would hold a prom in the capitol but made concessions in keeping with the faculty's critiques of the prom. In light of the recently-ended war, the prom would honor returning

⁴⁵ "Junior Prom Investigators Hold Hearing," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 6 March 1913, 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ David Pollard, "Gala Event Today Recalls Yesteryear's Prom Dispute," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 15 February 1946.

servicemen, and uniforms would be considered formal attire. The referendum also sought to contain costs by requiring that all pre-prom entertainments be informal, ticket prices would be reduced, and no flowers allowed. Women had a separate referendum about costs in which they agreed not to wear evening coats nor purchase more than one new gown. Student support for this referendum was more than six to one in favor of the Prom, and nearly 600 couples attended the “Victory” prom.⁴⁹

While the University of Wisconsin looked to East Coast universities to define the college experience, universities in nearby Milwaukee looked to Madison as their point of reference. Despite Wisconsin’s desire to control costs, their prom was seen by these other schools as an example of extravagance. Two Milwaukee higher education institutions, the Milwaukee Normal School, later to become the University of Wisconsin’s Milwaukee campus, and Marquette University, a Catholic school, began holding proms in the 1910s.

The Milwaukee Normal School had its first junior prom in 1913, though the seniors already had an annual dance. They were self-conscious of starting a tradition, as the yearbook recalled, “On the night of April the eighteenth occurred Milwaukee Normal’s First Annual Junior Prom.”⁵⁰ Already declaring it to be an annual event, students showed their preconceptions of a prom’s place in campus life. The school’s prom featured the grand march, led by the committee chair, and the procession formed a letter M in the ballroom floor as an emblem of school spirit. A few years later, seniors of the class of 1916 decided to hold the school’s first senior prom. Their yearbook gave space for the prom’s chairman to congratulate his class, “It was indeed an innovation. In the past it was generally agreed that the giving of a ‘Prom’ was distinctly a junior privilege. Indeed, who ever [sic] heard of a Senior Prom! Thus its originality alone made an impression.”⁵¹ The class’ junior prom had been a success, and students sought to exceed their previous efforts as the yearbook asked whether their cohort’s senior prom would equal their junior event. The school’s newspaper also noted that Milwaukee Normal School alumni who now attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison were also in attendance, and the tone of this remark betrays how students ranked their schools within a social hierarchy and placed Madison and its prom at the pinnacle in this region. The senior prom was so successful that 350 couples attended and another hundred couples “had to be refused admission due to the crowd already in the hall.”⁵² Students at Milwaukee Normal School were quick to embrace the junior prom as a school tradition and to even extend it to seniors.

The experience at nearby Marquette University is also enlightening as to how central prom was to a university in students’ minds. Marquette University had held its first junior proms earlier than the Milwaukee Normal School, and Marquette’s publication reported on how adults, faculty and alumni, looked on as one of these early proms was underway.⁵³ By observing these events, these adults gave their tacit approval. Marquette students also included a grand march, and expanded their annual prom into a Prom Week of festivities in 1911 much as other universities devoted the days surrounding the prom to additional social events. Student organizers decided to feature boxes at the Prom for the first time, just as Yale and other eastern universities had done. This implementation of the grand march and the week-long festivities

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ John Newman, “Junior Prom,” *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School) (1913), 134.

⁵¹ Earl Butter, “The Junior Prom,” *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School) (1916), 160. Despite the amount of communication between campuses, evidently word of Yale’s Senior Prom had not spread as widely as its Junior Prom.

⁵² S. Williams, “Senior Class Promenade,” *Normal Bulletin* (Milwaukee), February 1916, 28.

⁵³ “The Annual Junior Prom,” *The Marquette College Journal*, April 1910, 31.

suggests that students had codified the quintessential elements of prom and they sought to have their proms meet that example.

Where Yale had had the Spoon Man, Midwestern universities had the prom king who was usually the male student elected as prom chairman. Both the University of Wisconsin and Marquette's junior classes engaged in this custom, with Marquette even holding primaries. These contests highlighted the social stratification within the student body and how students determined popularity. The Marquette student journal covered the 1910 election results with descriptions of the candidates and their attributes. That year's winner, Oliver O'Boyle, "is a student of the Law department. He is a popular man and well fitted for the important position. Huegle, his opponent, was no less popular, being one of the best football men in the university."⁵⁴ What made the two men viable candidates was their popularity, which for Huegle was clearly attributed to his athleticism. At the class banquet, O'Boyle seized the opportunity to address his fellow juniors and campaign for the position. Huegle, who could not attend the banquet, answered with a poster campaign, which touted his qualifications and agenda,

Vote for Huegle. He is a good student as well as a good football player. He has attended two proms at the University of Wisconsin and the Marquette prom of last year. He is not bossed by any fraternity or clique, but is open to suggestions of any sort that will in any way benefit the prom. He advocates the organization of the alumni for prom purposes. Huegle does not believe that it is fair to assess every junior \$1.00 before closing contracts for the prom, because there are some who do not feel financially able to attend and they should not be made to pay for the pleasure of others. He guarantees, if elected, to divide the committees, giving a chairman to each department.⁵⁵

Huegle's statement portrayed him as both firmly within the student establishment through his involvement in football and his experience with other proms at other schools, yet it also sought to appeal to students outside the Greek system by portraying him as sympathetic to students who were less fortunate. These latter two groups of students evidently had not been as involved in the prom and thus were seen as a potentially significant voting bloc who might be rallied to resist an additional one-dollar charge. However, when 185 students voted in the runoff, O'Boyle won, and his victory speaks to the prevalence of the Greek system or student hierarchy as he proceeded to enact this \$1 charge of the junior class.⁵⁶ The prom chairman at Marquette thus embodied many of the same qualities as the Spoon Man at Yale did, and the similarity between what contributed to students' popularity further illustrates the concomitant development of student culture across the nation.

Yet Huegle's candidacy statement implies that a significant portion of the student body sought to challenge the direction of that culture. The Marquette *Journal* placed the upcoming 1911 prom as comparable to "any of the remarkable achievements in Educational development or Athletics that have so characterized Marquette within the past half-decade."⁵⁷ Although this author equated the prom with school pride and identity, this sentiment did not necessarily pervade the rest of the student body, for the next year's junior class decided to finance a

⁵⁴ "Election of Chairman for Junior Prom," *The Marquette College Journal*, December 1910, 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Junior Promenade," *The Marquette College Journal*, February 1911, 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

basketball team instead of a prom. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, students at Marquette went without a prom for four years, during which the student body continued to have dances, but no proms.⁵⁸ This gap between proms demonstrates that students were not all convinced of the import of the prom as more than a dance and also suggests that Huegle's concerns about costs and fraternity dominance resonated with some of the student body.

When students sought to revive the prom in 1916, they still found themselves debating costs and what a prom should represent about Marquette's student life. Just as at Wisconsin, some students recognized that many classmates were self-supporting and argued that a prom was too formal and expensive for their community. Proponents of a Marquette prom responded that their prom would be "much less expensive than [similar] functions held at Madison and Iowa City, where the attendant expenses of this climax of the school year loom up like a board bill. The Marquette Prom as planned, will cost, at the most, in the neighborhood of twenty-five dollars, a modest sum when compared with the fifty or sixty dollars required to 'do' the Wisconsin or Iowa Prom."⁵⁹ Despite Wisconsin students' efforts at restraint, their prom was still viewed as too extravagant for Marquette students who sought to tame the prom's costs further. Just as the Yale Prom would have been excessive to Madison students, Madison's prom was excessive to Marquette students; students' perceptions of extravagance and moderation were relative.

The 1916 prom however did not turn a profit – the organizers did not cut enough costs or did not get enough students interested in attending the event. A student poll of Marquette's junior class in 1917 determined that they favored a "general informal University mixer." University officials raised objections to further proms. They wanted the finances of the last year's prom to be settled, and the seniors agreed to pay the debts. University officials also felt that continuing to hold such a social affair would not add "dignity nor standing" to the university and so should not be held. If the juniors wanted to hold another prom, the administration would require them to meet with faculty, who would consider their "class standing and business ability."⁶⁰ Whereas the faculty had given their tacit support to the prom earlier, they were now concerned about how a prom would reflect upon the university, much as Wisconsin's faculty had.

Seeking to convince classmates and administration of the necessity of a prom, a student editorial that same day asked, "The question of whether Marquette is to slide back into promless obscurity or take her place as a full-fledged university in all fields must be decided and decided very shortly." Unlike university officials, this student did see the prom as a contribution to the university's standing, and as a means of positive comparison between Marquette and other schools; the prom was a key component of student culture that had become central to defining a university. The editorial continued, "A university man should mean a complete man. A complete man should be able to wear a full dress suit as well as to trisect an angle, carve a cadaver, brief a case or forge a set of false teeth. If he does not give himself that experience during his university career, he must feel that he has been cheated. A successful prom is an asset to a university. It gives it dignity and so raises its standing in the community."⁶¹ Furthermore, the author linked prom to a wider view of the accomplishments provided by a university education and contended

⁵⁸ "The A. & S. Junior Class has decided to finance a basketball team instead of running a prom this year," *The Marquette College Journal*, February 1913, 49. A board bill was the collection of charges assigned to a boarder in a student rooming house.

⁵⁹ H. R., "Junior Prom," *The Marquette College Journal*, February 1916, 17.

⁶⁰ "Fate of Junior Prom in Doubt," *Marquette Tribune*, 12 March 1917, 1.

⁶¹ "Junior Prom?" *Marquette Tribune*, 12 March 1917, 6.

that wearing formalwear, and presumably social poise, were valuable assets in life. The editorial went on to argue that this year's prom could be a financial success since eliminating frills would help students afford the event, and pointed to the fact that Madison was not allowing flowers. The editorial asserted, "It should be understood from the beginning that the expenses are to be kept within the income of the average student. With hard work and conservative management the price of the tickets could be kept down to four dollars." Another student writing to the school paper in 1918 argued that a successful prom after World War I "would keep the city's University in the minds of her people and, if nothing else, will make Milwaukee proud of Marquette."⁶² Students cared about the reputation of their school in the eyes of others, and these statements show students identifying the prom as a significant representation of Marquette.

The transmission of the prom illuminates the network of communication between peers at different institutions and the process by which the prom became a vital custom. Students viewed the prom as a symbol of their campus' position on a regional or national stage. Other schools' proms may have varied in the details, but the spirit was very similar. Harvard juniors began holding a Junior Dance in 1905.⁶³ Although the event was not initially titled a prom, it featured many conventions of prom, such as class affiliation and boxes around the dance floor, and it gained the prom title informally during the 1910s.⁶⁴ At Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the prom was tied to graduation as students there had a senior prom tradition by 1901 before holding an annual junior prom.⁶⁵ Fraternities and sororities sought to replicate the prom experience by holding proms of their own and thus appropriate the tradition's prestige for themselves. In the 1910s, Esther Steinbeck's letters to her family reveal the frequency of proms held by sororities at Mills College in California – the dances seemed to occur every month or even every couple of weeks.⁶⁶ Just as Yale's Spoon Man traditions found echoes in the prom king of Wisconsin and the grand march, students at schools across the United States offered their variations on the theme of prom.

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, the prom continued to rise in importance to students at university campuses nationwide. Yale's prom continued to become more elaborate and embrace a slew of additional events, and students at other colleges adopted the prom as part of their tradition. The relation of wealth to social status was ubiquitous in this era. Yet the prom's rise was not without debate, both among adults and students. Both expressed concerns about what a formal event meant for their schools and challenged the prom for being anti-democratic. Students though sought to make the prom fit their school's unique situation rather than give up the tradition and halt its spread across America's campuses.

The prom was thus well-established by the 1920s and flourished in that decade, as did youth culture generally, but it was not a petrified institution. Proms evolved to incorporate new trends in music and dancing, while remaining attached to a student culture that promoted a social hierarchy among peers. Conformity and competition among students as described by historian Paula Fass dominated campus life in the 1920s.⁶⁷ College students were so wedded to proms that students barely halted prom extravagance during the Great Depression, and they interpreted

⁶² Letter to editor, *Marquette Tribune*, 7 March 1918, 9.

⁶³ Howard Moore Turner, et al., eds, *Harvard Class Album 1906* (Cambridge: University Press, 1906), 145.

⁶⁴ "Pudding Tea to Open Prom," *Harvard Crimson*, January 24, 1916.

⁶⁵ "Programme of Commencement Exercises," *John Hopkins News-Letter*, June 14, 1901.

⁶⁶ Esther Steinbeck to her parents, 1911 passim, Esther Steinbeck Collection, Mills College, Oakland, California.

⁶⁷ Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

having proms as a way to honor the students who would soon enter the fighting forces of World War II. Furthermore, the lack of resistance from adults reflects the entrenchment of prom in university life. The period from 1920 to 1950 was the height of the collegiate prom.

Despite new trends in dancing and music during the 1920s, students still rallied behind the prom, which easily incorporated these new styles. Madison proms may have continued to use dance cards into this decade, but those cards featured new types of music with new corresponding dances.⁶⁸ At Milwaukee Normal School, the 1922 Junior prom held a fox trot contest for students to compose a piece of music in fox trot time, with the rest of the student population voting on the best two fox trots at a mixer before the Prom.⁶⁹ Reflecting continued or even heightened student enthusiasm for the prom, student newspapers ran special prom issues or supplements with articles and pictures solely regarding the prom. Student editors at Milwaukee Normal School wrote, “Among the various projects to be undertaken in regard to the Junior Prom, a special edition of the *Echo* will be put out. It will consist of either ten or twelve pages of live-wire dope on the Prom.”⁷⁰ The editors then announced that Arthur H. Nicolaus would edit this issue, and touted his “wide experience in the journalistic field” and his “position of city editor on the staff of the *Milwaukee Times*.” The desire to assure readers of Nicolaus’s credentials suggests how seriously students treated the prom. Yale students also produced a pictorial supplement for the prom; the 1924 edition ran pictures of the grand march and an enormous crowd dancing.⁷¹ The desire to commemorate prom in such an extended fashion shows the important and symbolic place prom had taken in college life.

The prom became enmeshed with local businesses, as youth frequented nearby shops according to the dating practices developed at that time. These business owners recognized prom as an established tradition, and this adult accommodation of prom-goers showed their acceptance and even endorsement of the student event. The history of Yale’s class of 1928 described its prom: “The metered cabs and the Venus boats of College Street tripled their already outrageous fares, [and] the Taft [Hotel] was filled and incompetent....”⁷² Local businesses, such as taxis and hotels, were a vital part of prom logistics; even if students felt taken advantage of, they knew their patronage was welcomed by business owners. At Milwaukee Normal School, an article described how several local shops were decorating especially for the prom, and it read like advertising copy: “Mrs. Becker across the way is assisting in adding to the Prom idea by special decorations of her tea room and ice cream parlor for the event. Don’t fail to treat HER to a Prom special at Becker’s before the week is over.”⁷³ Adults’ use of the prom as promotion for their businesses shows that they recognized it as an opportunity, since student newspapers promoted the businesses that catered to students, but also adults’ cooperation with student customers demonstrated their acceptance of the prom.

The prom remained a site of competition among students jockeying for status. Fraternities solidified their power on campus as well as their sway over the prom. Beginning in the late 1920s, Yale College fraternities built their own houses, and members entertained their

⁶⁸ Dance cards from 1920s, Student Life: Miscellaneous Activities, Junior Prom, etc. Series 20/4/1, Box 1, University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

⁶⁹ “Unique Programmes Chosen for Junior Prom by Committee,” *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 13 Mar 1922, 1.

⁷⁰ “The Prom Echo,” *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 3 April 1922, 1.

⁷¹ Pictorial Supplement, *Yale Daily News*, 9 February 1924, in Photographs and pictures of student life – RU 736, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

⁷² *History of the Class of 1928 Yale College* (New Haven: Class Secretaries Bureau, 1928), 47.

⁷³ “Merchants Decorate For Prom Week,” *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 24 April 1922, 3.

female guests there rather than seeking aid from their peers at Sheffield Scientific School during the prom weekend. In Wisconsin, some students jockeyed to become elected prom king, while others then speculated on who the king would choose as his queen. Madison's campus first began officially terming the prom chairman's partner the "Queen" in the 1920s.⁷⁴ It was briefly customary for the king to keep his queen selection a secret, and one humor column in the Milwaukee Normal School newspaper pretended to have sent a reporter out to interview 8,000 Milwaukee girls and ask whether any of them were the prom queen.⁷⁵ This excitement over the prom queen's identity illustrates how mindful students were of social status on campus and reveals their dizzy internal world. One student speculating over the prom queen wrote, "Of course, we know that Billy steps around with only A-1 girls and there is no question about how his Prom partner will rate."⁷⁶ Students were aware of each other's social standing and would evaluate a prom king's choice of queen and judge whether she had sufficient status on campus. An article about the 1922 junior prom queen, Catherine Enwright, wrote that her selection by the king Evan Schwemer, "met with the popular approval of the whole school. Miss Enwright has been a leader in various school activities and social functions during the past year. Her experience in conducting the Friday afternoon mixers will enable her to assist Mr. Schwemer in his prom work."⁷⁷ The prom thus continued to be an expression of the social hierarchy on campuses and illustrate what kind of students were held to have high status.

Yet even as the prom confirmed the social hierarchy, some students challenged its hold on the prom by expressing a desire for a more inclusive prom. Conflicts over the formality of the prom and its affordability for the student body continued in Milwaukee, where the city's normal school had a senior and a junior prom. In 1922, the Senior Prom was organized by chairman Walter Bauman, who said, "I believe in making the Prom this year all informal. It will create a more democratic spirit and it's bound to meet with the approval of the student body."⁷⁸ A student humorist concurred by poking fun at classmates who would not be satisfied with anything but a formal prom, "It is mighty funny how all the Wally Reids crave an Informal Prom and how all the Ben Turpins and Hams and Buds wants it formal."⁷⁹ The ironic references to proponents of the informal prom as Reid, who was a silent-screen heartthrob, and those favoring formality as Turpin, a comedian known for being cross-eyed, also suggest this author's point of view that the informal prom should be seen as the more dignified option. The column went on, "Along comes Leroy Rieselbach with the argument that the Senior jib should have been formal and that the Juniors ought to save the day with a strictly formal affair. Thanx, Roy, the Juniors don't believe in making all of the city costume men rich, however."⁸⁰ This humorist argued that juniors had little to gain from a more formal event. Therefore, there were also strong voices arguing for a less formal approach, and with the onset of the Great Depression later in the decade, it seemed for a moment like they might reshape the prom.

Students who faced financial limitations due to the Great Depression initially tried to adapt the prom to reflect the times by making the events smaller and less expensive. These attempts to change the prom suggest that students were more dedicated to having a class dance

⁷⁴ "Squirrel Skin Programs, Buggy Rides Highlight Prom's 54 Year Old History," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 22 April 1950, 4.

⁷⁵ "Shovel Column," *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 23 January 1922, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ "Catherine Enwright to be Prom Queen," *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 3 April 1922, 1.

⁷⁸ "Preparations for Prom Complete," *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 23 January 1922, 1.

⁷⁹ "Shovel Column," *The Echo* (Milwaukee Normal School), 23 January 1922, 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

than to its being extravagant, but many students who could not even afford a more moderate prom responded by not attending, and in the early 1930s prom attendance fell by almost half.⁸¹ At Harvard, the Junior Dance had never taken on the significance that it had at Yale or Princeton and had been declining since World War I.⁸² After a decade of decreasing attendance, students voted to make 1930 its last year.⁸³ Johns Hopkins' 1930 yearbook recalled of its prom, "In spite of all the traditions of what should constitute such an affair and such notable examples of the past as the 'Pow Wow' and the 'hell Party,' this year's dance was just a quiet little party."⁸⁴ Early in the Depression, students at most universities responded to the nation's financial situation by making their proms more modest.

However, the prom was already entrenched in student culture as lavish and the Depression only briefly slowed this down. Madison students innovated in 1931 by introducing the Badger Beauties, girls who would serve on the court of honor at Madison and promote the prom in hard times.⁸⁵ Yale's freshman even added their own prom in 1932; having been excluded by the traditional junior prom, they wanted access to this tradition no matter the state of the economy.⁸⁶ Furthermore, by 1936, students at many campuses had returned to holding large proms and gave up on stricter budgets; formality and expense were too engrained in students' perceptions of what a prom should be. Madison's 1936 prom had almost 1,000 couples and cleared a profit of \$1,200.⁸⁷ The next year, Madison and Princeton both had prom budgets of \$3000, with smaller schools such as Vassar reporting budgets closer to \$1,000. Schools again vied for big name bands, which would draw larger student crowds, and paid hefty sums to secure them. Yale paid \$1,650 for Rudy Valley and his orchestra, and Ohio State paid \$1,400 for Ozzie Nelson.⁸⁸ This return to large prom budgets reinforced an expectation of opulent proms.

These big proms also meant a return to large expenses for students. *A Literary Digest* article on the resurgence of expensive proms estimated that prom costs could take "half, maybe all, of the average lad's monthly allowance." According to its survey, the cost for a prom-going couple ranged from \$25 at Princeton to \$15 at Wisconsin and \$7 at Ohio State, and these cost estimates were based on tickets, flowers, and liquor, but excluded clothing expenses.⁸⁹ Yale and Princeton prohibited flowers at the proms to prevent competition among students to display the most expensive flowers, but both universities allowed flowers at breakfasts and tea-dances where students still competed to have their dates seen wearing something special. Madison's student newspaper portrayed the costs of prom this way in 1937,

⁸¹ "Swing It: College 'Proms' Crowded Again and Expenses of an Escort Mount," *Literary Digest*, 22 May 1937, 32-33.

⁸² "Junior Year," *Harvard Class Album*, (1930), 181.

⁸³ "Farewell Blues," *The Crimson* (Harvard), 21 January 1930. There is also the suggestion that students no longer felt as strong a class affiliation due to the reorganization of students into Houses, which then took over students' loyalties. However, this shift in loyalties does not explain the decline of Harvard's prom during the 1920s. "Junior Year," *Harvard Class Album*, 1931, 187. Strangely, the *Literary Digest* article claims that Harvard still had a prom in 1937.

⁸⁴ "Hopkins Day by Day," *The Hullabaloo* (Johns Hopkins University) (1930), 297.

⁸⁵ Jean Dopp, "First Prom Held in 1895 in 'New' Armory," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 13 January 13, 1953, 8.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth G. Curren, "Fun and Tradition Hold Sway At Yale Promenade," *New Haven Register*, 5 March 1967, 40 in Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

⁸⁷ "Prom Profits Reach \$1,200," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 11 February 1936, 1.

⁸⁸ "Swing It: College 'Proms' Crowded Again," *Literary Digest*, 22 May 1937, 32.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

To the gentleman in his tux or ‘tails,’ who made his bid for the lady of his choice some weeks back, the occasion is an excuse to buy her orchids, to spend anywhere from \$7 to \$35, and to act slightly abnormal for three days. As for the lady, it is an opportunity to wear that smooth-flowing formal dress that she has been admiring for the past two weeks, and to display her ultra-sophistication in the Langdon street style.⁹⁰

Students’ behavior reflected how public displays of wealth as markers of status confirmed a social hierarchy based on money and peer opinion.

The *Literary Digest* article heralded the return of costly proms as a sign of economic resurgence but also as a window into the privileged life of college students. Thus, even in the Depression, there was a public interest in student life and the article noted that prom had an aspirational quality. It asserted, “‘Prom’ has become a sort of generic term for all big college dances. ... The name ‘prom,’ because of its traditional ‘class,’ has been appropriated by most small schools for their chief event.”⁹¹ Even though Southern schools might use terms like “finals,” and military schools called formal dances “hops” or “balls,” their parties were all regarded as fitting into the prom category. As a category of dances, the prom had become linked to class status and codified in student culture nationwide.

Students evidently viewed ideas of class through their own social hierarchy. A Madison student newspaper article titled, “Campus Society Turns Out for Junior Prom,” consisted of a three-page list of fraternity and sorority members and their dates to the prom.⁹² The titling of this article implies that students who were in Greek organizations were perceived as constituting the student version of high society. In 1937 at Madison, even when the newspaper heralded the “first [prom] king to represent the independents and smaller fraternities,” the prom did not break away from the dominant Greek organizations.⁹³ William Pryor, a member of the less prestigious Sigma Nu, forged a coalition of independents and smaller fraternities to wrestle the prom kingship away from an older alliance of fraternities. After an intense election campaign resulting in Pryor’s victory, the paper made a joke of Pryor running off to be with Wallis Simpson, the American socialite whose romance with King Edward VIII led him to abdicate the throne. The humorist wrote, “Their match became a certainty as soon as King William discovered that she was not a Pie Fie, Dee Gee, Kappa, Alpha fee, Gamma Fie, or a Theyta. Mrs. Simpson is independent.”⁹⁴ However, the larger fraternities were still able to show their strength by threatening to boycott the prom until “Pryor offered them some committee chairmanships to appease them, which then caused Pryor’s original coalition to cry foul.”⁹⁵ While the fraternities maintained dominance over leadership of the prom, the *Literary Digest* article charged that prom chairs often reaped financial benefits from the position with the tacit knowledge of their peers; this additional perk perhaps also was part of the fraternal organizations’ goal. Thus, on many campuses, fraternities’ elite status both was confirmed and reflected in their dominance of social events such as the prom.

⁹⁰ “Junior Prom Swings Along,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 1.

⁹¹ “Swing It: College ‘Proms’ Crowded Again,” *Literary Digest*, 22 May 1937, 33.

⁹² Pauline Coles, “Campus Society Turns Out For Junior Prom,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 4.

⁹³ “Junior Prom Swings Along,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 1.

⁹⁴ “The Prom Weakly,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 7.

⁹⁵ “Junior Prom Swings Along,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1937, 1.

World War II had an obvious impact on the prom by removing many young men from college to serve in the military. Proms nevertheless adapted, with students imbuing the tradition with patriotism. Madison's prom committee declared a no-corsage policy in 1942 and urged students to use money they would have spent on flowers to buy defense savings stamps instead – "Buy their corsages from Uncle Sam."⁹⁶ In writing that all the fraternity men agreed to this policy, the student newspaper implied the continued significance of Greek life on campus and offers their endorsement of this policy as proof of their influence. Yet fraternities seemed more content to accede to a greater campus life; they participated in the first all-campus prom dinner that brought together 150 couples of both Greeks and Independents in the Union in 1942.⁹⁷ Moreover, the student journalist speculated that some students would buy stamps as well as corsages; this suggests that students would not listen to the fraternities and that there was still pressure to compete through the longstanding tradition of flowers.⁹⁸

This observance of the war's importance, however, was also used as justification for continuation of the prom tradition. Johns Hopkins continued to have junior prom in 1942 and 1943 with students taking the attitude that "since most seniors were looking forward to becoming members of the country's armed forces, it was decided that no expense or effort should be spared in giving them a year at Hopkins that would long be remembered."⁹⁹ Students were so determined to have a prom that despite the difficulty of convincing an orchestra to travel and the hassle of securing them transportation, they persevered and did much "bickering, haggling, and wire-buzzing" with New York agencies to get the orchestras they wanted.¹⁰⁰ The prom's resilience in wartime further illustrates how students embraced the event as central to their university experience.

In the immediate postwar years, proms boomed. Returning servicemen played a large role in campus life at universities such as Johns Hopkins where the junior class sought to "restore the Prom to all the glory of its pre-war trappings" in 1947.¹⁰¹ In the yearbook, half the space given to the junior class was devoted to describing the prom. To build up the prom, Johns Hopkins students began publicity two months in advance, held a May Queen contest, and also had two honorary fraternities tap new members. The same year in Madison, a blizzard bad enough to cancel classes did not "prevent almost 1700 promenaders from attending the big dance of the year." Enough public interest in the prom existed such that "prom music, proceedings, and interviews of the king and queen were broadcast to a state-wide audience."¹⁰²

During the period between 1920 and 1950, the collegiate prom was at its peak in popularity among students. Students viewed the prom as a defining feature of the university experience and continued to put on proms through such crises as the Great Depression and World War II. Despite the upheavals these momentous events caused in the nation, they led students to restrain their proms only briefly. With regard to the prom, students seemed more occupied with their social hierarchy, and the most salient challenges to the prom's character

⁹⁶ "Prom Corsages Optional; Savings Stamps Suggested," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 February 1942, sect. 2, p. 1.

⁹⁷ "First Joint Greek, Independent Fete In History of Prom," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 5 February 1942, 1.

⁹⁸ "Co-ed Scrap Books May Still Contain '42 Prom Corsages," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 5 February 1942, 1.

⁹⁹ *The Hullabaloo* (Johns Hopkins) (1943), 120-121.

¹⁰⁰ "Cotillion Board," *The Hullabaloo* (Johns Hopkins) (1943), 176-177.

¹⁰¹ "Junior Class," *The Hullabaloo* (Johns Hopkins) (1947), 54.

¹⁰² "Pre-Prom," *The Badger* (University of Wisconsin) (1947).

stemmed from students' questioning the dominance of fraternities and arguing that the prom should be more accessible to students. Nevertheless, the prom remained central to student culture, and the lack of adult uproar or questioning over the prom further shows how it had become widely accepted as a part of university life. The return of proms on a grand scale following World War II seemed to suggest that the prom would remain a vital institution of university life.

While the 1950s then began with proms fully inscribed upon student culture, the decade saw student interest in the activity decline. Prom attendance levels dropped dramatically and sent prom committees into the red. The expanding student body, which was democratizing enrollments at colleges during this period, evidently no longer viewed the prom as a meaningful campus institution. Student leaders tried to find ways to adapt the prom so it would again appeal to their classmates, and they consulted with their peers at other universities for ideas or for confirmation that the prom should be abandoned. At Yale, whose prom was such a longstanding junior rite, a few key administrators remained attached to the prom and worked with student committees to prolong the tradition despite apathy and resistance from the rest of the student body and other faculty. The prom had become an institution whose customs were unable to keep up with the new generation of students, but students still sought a peer consensus to eventually end the collegiate prom.

When students at the University of Wisconsin switched from voting for a prom king to voting for a prom queen in 1952, they hoped to bring the prom more into line with changes in student culture. A student editorial commented, "It has always seemed a little foolish to choose a king (who, for the past several years, has only held a figure-head position) at a regular campus-wide election."¹⁰³ Students now valued the queen position over the king, although no queen could succeed on female support alone. Queens received valuable endorsements from fraternities, and some male students still sought to maintain some dominance over the process rather than yielding to the feminization of the prom. Letters to the school newspaper in 1954 by Paul Conaghan and Stan Kemmeter proposed a requirement that the queen candidates have male campaign managers as well as sponsorship from a men's living unit regardless of whether they had already secured the support of a women's unit.¹⁰⁴ However, Conaghan and Kemmeter were fighting a losing battle. Already in 1953, the prom's feminization had been further cemented when Ann Vanderwall became the first female chair of the prom committee.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, these adaptations of the prom to embrace female leadership did not do enough to align the prom with the current student culture as the prom began a decline at Wisconsin.

The same year that Wisconsin began electing a prom queen, its junior class president Ed Trapp received a letter from Lorraine Smith, a student at Indiana University, asking for advice on setting up a queen contest.¹⁰⁶ Smith inquired as to whether Wisconsin had any new or unusual

¹⁰³ "To Prom-Goers," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 29 February 1952, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Conaghan and Stan Kemmeter, Letters about Prom Queen elections, *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 19 November 1954, in Student Life – Government and Policy-making Groups, Wisconsin Student Association, Executive, Special Projects Department, (Prom 1949-1956), University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

¹⁰⁵ "First Time in 60 yrs. Woman to 'Boss' Prom," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 1 December 1953, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Lorraine Smith to Edd Trapp, 3 January 1952 in Student Life – Government and Policy-making Groups, Wisconsin Student Association, Executive, Special Projects Department, (Prom 1949-1956), University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

ideas for prom themes or for publicity.¹⁰⁷ This exchange was not abnormal since it followed in the wake of much correspondence between students of different institutions, but it also possibly signaled the beginning of a decline in interest in the prom, as prom organizers sought ways to improve upon their prom to attract larger crowds.

Indeed, the prom's decline at Wisconsin was quite evident in the dropping attendance rates for the event in the mid-1950s. On February 26, 1957, a student editorial called for further support and study of the prom, recognizing that "if the 1957 Prom isn't a success, it's probable that it might not be held again." The editors noted that students have been dissatisfied with the Prom, but argued there were good reasons to hold a prom, "It offers independent students an opportunity to attend a formal dance. It is one of the few really all-campus events the university has and consequently it helps establish campus unity. Finally, Prom is simply a nice custom, but in this era, tradition alone cannot be considered sufficient ground for continuing any event."¹⁰⁸ Student editors were perhaps more invested in upholding tradition than the average student, but they also thought that, although the prom was a vestige of another time, it could be brought into modern times. By casting the prom as an opportunity specifically for independent students though, these editors observed that fraternity members had their own formal events. Whereas fraternities had previously used the prom to flaunt their place in the social hierarchy, they perhaps saw less to gain from a more democratized prom focused on student unity. However, just as prom had been adapted before to meet students' needs, students at the newspaper hoped that it could evolve again.

With that in mind, a student committee at Wisconsin conducted a survey of proms at various universities. The committee wrote to student leaders at a variety of universities, including schools on the East and West Coast, private and public. Northwestern, Indiana University, Penn State, and Michigan State all responded that their schools had proms which were financial successes. Penn State said the junior and senior proms were great financial successes – the dances cost between \$2000 and \$3000 but cleared profits over \$1000 – yet also noted a growing informality to these dances. Ohio State said its dances were a success but their actual prom was nontraditional, in that girls asked boys. These remarks indicated that students recognized that proms needed to adapt in order to stay viable and that proms were becoming feminized. Michigan State even reported that more students wished to go each year and viewed this as student approval for the student government, but Indiana University reported a declining attendance even as prom remained profitable. Indiana's correspondent wrote, "The Junior Prom seems to be in a position of diminishing importance; however, few, if any, dances held during the year exceed its popularity."¹⁰⁹ This survey shows how students viewed the prom as their concern, rather than the adult administration's, and this poll of peers suggests a desire to see if a consensus existed about the prom. Even among these schools with successful proms, students seemed to see a shift away from prom as it had traditionally been.

That prom seemed to be at a turning point was highlighted as a number of other schools reported that the prom was only a success half the time, and posted losses the other half. Washington University's student secretary wrote that numerous other spring dances, especially those held by fraternities and sororities, competed with the prom for attention and concluded,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ "Prom Needs Support and Study," *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 26 February 1957, 4.

¹⁰⁹ "Prom Survey, 1956-57," Student Life – Government and Policy-making Groups, Wisconsin Student Association, Executive, Special Projects Department, (Prom 1949-1956), University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

“There is little wholehearted support from the students. ... If the present trends continue, the Prom will have to be discontinued.”¹¹⁰ UCLA wrote that the junior class has sustained losses each year since 1954, no matter whether they tried to save money by holding the event on campus or attract student interest by holding it off campus at greater expense. Stanford also reported that half of their junior proms lost money, even though attendance actually was at an all-time high in 1955. Prom was a tradition that was losing money, due to a lack of student interest or to the bloated expectations that came with its traditions. Students also seemed to be more interested in other forms of entertainment, with fraternities and sororities perpetuating their exclusiveness.

Whatever improvements the student committee proposed to improve the prom did not succeed in drawing students back to Wisconsin’s proms. The 1959 prom committee hoped to increase attendance by moving the prom back to the capitol building, rather than the student union building that was used every day. A letter to the editor claimed that a student poll showed “great enthusiasm among the students for holding Prom in the capitol.”¹¹¹ The Student Life and Interests Committee set up a special committee to study the prom further and evaluate the worth of big name bands and queen elections.¹¹² Students who supported having a prom had already begun hedging on the prom’s success with arguments that the event should not be expected to make money. Nevertheless, these efforts failed to prevent the Student Senate from voting 21 to 7 in April 1959 to abolish the prom. Pat Burbridge, student co-chairman of the SLIC General Student Organization and Politics subcommittee, said, “I think that it’s no longer necessary for a big ten school to have an all campus dance. All-school dances are clearly declining. Both Northwestern and Illinois have canceled theirs. Kids don’t want big formal dances any more. We prefer smaller parties with our own groups.”¹¹³ Burbridge displayed how students still looked to peer behavior at other institutions by citing the cancellation of proms by Northwestern and Illinois students. She then asserted that students did not even realize the prom was the work of the student association and that other events, such as Union mixers, “fulfill student desires much better than Prom.” She portrayed the prom as a money-losing event whose main constituency was Greeks and dorm residents, who already had their own formals to attend.

In response, one student Richard Wheeler wrote a piece about the prom in the school newspaper arguing that the “Prom is dead because it is no longer something special. The continuous democratization of the event, the price lower, the increasingly informal attire killed off Prom as the cheapening would.”¹¹⁴ He charged that “conformist thinking” has ruined the prom, and that the prom should be seen as a privilege and be made more elite. He suggests raising the cost of prom: “Were a financial barrier established once again Prom might once more become a highly desirable and exciting event.” He also claims that limiting the number of tickets would create more demand and that a smaller chamber group should be procured to play elegant music rather than a big name band. The tenor of the piece is so extreme that it is hard to tell whether this is a satire by a student trying to make fun of the prom as a stuffy holdover of the past or a student who genuinely believes in the virtue of a formal and elite event.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “On Prom In Capitol,” letter to the editor, *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 13 November 1958, 2.

¹¹² “‘U’ Prom Not Satisfactory, Group Says” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 4 December 1958, 1.

¹¹³ “Student Senate Votes to Abolish Annual Prom,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 8 April 1959, 1.

¹¹⁴ Richard S. Wheeler, “Wheeler Discusses Prom,” *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin), 15 April 1959, 2.

Students in favor of the prom, though they also believed the prom should be special, however largely argued instead that the prom was a unifying event. The SLIC Committee on Prom reported in 1960 that the prom “is an exclusive prestige function sponsored by the Wisconsin Student Association. It strengthens the Wisconsin Student Association and its involvement in a variety of activities on many fronts in the campus community.” These students believed the advantages of the prom were that the whole university could participate and students would have a unique social experience. They suggested cutting costs on the band and decorations to reduce ticket prices and also extending curfew for prom attendees as an inducement for the prom. Even so, the committee acknowledged that “changing social patterns with more students ‘going steady’, making relationships more informal, and a trend toward smaller group activities, have resulted in many campus social organizations sponsoring their own formal dances.”¹¹⁵ The committee was concerned about the declining prestige of the prom but cited how changes in student culture showed the prom was losing its appeal. Despite continued debates in 1960 over holding another one, the prom at Wisconsin clearly could not win over the student body.

Even Yale was not immune to this waning student support for the prom. Its proms during the 1950s regularly had debts due to low student attendance and high expenses. For the 1958 prom, only 245 juniors out of a class of 900 attended the prom, and the rest of the attendees were 203 sophomores and 91 seniors.¹¹⁶ Prom chairman James Connors emphasized the need to move tradition along in 1958 in his notes for future proms, “It is most important to keep an open mind. There are certain aspects of the Prom such as the ‘spoon ceremony’ which are traditional. However, there is a great deal of freedom in which to work and this freedom should be exercised.” Even though some aspects of the prom seemed fixed in popular imagination as defining characteristics of the prom, others should be changed to reflect student’s changing tastes. He emphasized the “most important keys to our success: a good strong liquor punch of strong but not acrid taste, danceable bands, variety of entertainment, timing of Prom, atmosphere created by decorations and lights, stress on party atmosphere, and use of the bursars bill.”¹¹⁷ He believed that these were the ingredients to a successful prom. Yale students who wished to continue the prom struggled to find the right combination of changes or fixes that would lure their classmates back to the prom.

Connors also wrote that the prom received significant support from administrative figures like Mrs. William Devane, the wife of the Dean of Yale College, and Richard Carroll, an Associate Dean and the new Dean of Undergraduate affairs. These administrators stood in defense of the prom tradition at Yale and sought to help the student organizers, but they were alarmed by the regular financial losses. Carroll in particular was concerned about the lack of student support, especially as seen in the debts racked up by successive prom committees. He wrote to prom chairman John M. Hill in 1958, “Additional deficits prior to 1956 bring the total indebtedness to \$3,941.43. Quite justifiably, the University feels it cannot continue to absorb these annual prom deficits.” Carroll said the administration would agree to write off these debts, but refused to absorb any future costs in an attempt to push the junior class to shoulder any new debt. This lack of student enthusiasm for the prom led him to conclude, “The question comes up

¹¹⁵ Report of the Special SLIC Committee On Prom, Student Life – Government and Policy-making Groups, Wisconsin Student Association, Executive, Special Projects Department, (Prom 1949-1956), University Archives, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

¹¹⁶ Richard C. Carroll to John M. Hill, 28 August 1958, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹¹⁷ James Connors, “Yale Junior Promenade 1958, Chairman’s Report,” Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

as to whether it is worthwhile to have a Junior Prom as we have known it in the past. If less than 1/3 of the class attends, and the Prom loses money each year, it would appear that the traditional Yale Prom is an anachronism.”¹¹⁸ He then proposed that the prom committee consider abolishing the prom by taking a poll to evaluate whether the junior class would support a prom.¹¹⁹ Carroll came to realize that students no longer felt the prom was relevant to their lives the way that it had for previous generations.

Even though he was open to abolishing the prom due to the lack of student support, Carroll did not wish for its end. He firmly believed the prom served a necessary purpose for the school and its students, and he wrote, “If the Juniors do not want a prom, we have got to find something to take its place.”¹²⁰ He was willing to consider other options, such as juniors holding dances in each of the residential colleges, which had been implemented in 1933 as a way to foster smaller communities within a growing student population. One administrator’s suggestion that the fraternities open themselves to all the undergraduates one weekend was rejected because of potential problems with the state government over alcohol. Carroll viewed something in the prom as vital to the college, and he became an advocate for continuing the prom tradition despite student indifference. In an unexpected turn of events, adult administrators would push to continue the prom even though the students had turned against it. What had once been a student-sponsored event became a tradition that adults sought to preserve.

When Kingman Brewster became the new president of Yale in 1963, he joined Carroll in propping up the prom as a Yale tradition. Carroll wrote to Brewster that first year about a meeting with the prom committee, “In particular, I stressed what we believe would be the students’ interest to bring back some dignity and decorum to this event and to make it a co-ordinated University effort in so far as possible.”¹²¹ The prom’s value was as a formal occasion which could inculcate polite manners and as an expression of school spirit, a modified understanding of the prom compared with the class spirit that earlier students had expressed. Carroll and Brewster helped arrange candlelight dinners in the residential colleges as part of the Prom weekend. Carroll saw these dinners as “reintroducing the kind of dignity and pleasant occasion that the prom once had and lost.”¹²² He may have tied prom’s refined past to nostalgia for previous generations, but Yale’s residential college masters, who were fellow administrators that lived among the students in the different colleges, saw the prom as outdated. George A. Schrader, chairman of the Council of Masters, wrote to the junior prom committee that the Masters’ Funds didn’t have enough money to contribute to the prom, and added, “Even if funds were available, there is a real question whether these funds should be spent, in view of the fact that only about twenty-five per cent of the students in the College attend the Prom.”¹²³

The junior prom may have been iconic, but during the 1950s, Dean Carroll observed that

¹¹⁸ Richard C. Carroll to John M. Hill, 28 August 1958.

¹¹⁹ Memo from meeting with Mr. Gage, Mr. Roberts, and Mr. McDonald, Richard Carroll, 20 June 1958, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Richard Carroll to Kingman Brewster, 9 December 1963, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²² Richard Carroll to Herbert Kutz, 10 March 1965, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²³ George A. Schrader to James Hedlund, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

it was the Senior and Freshman proms that drew more students.¹²⁴ Even in the 1960s, the 1964 Senior Prom, which featured six different artists for entertainment and spent \$2,583.50, had revenues of \$4,623.50 from selling 600 tickets and thus made a profit of \$2,040.¹²⁵ The Freshman Prom, despite a stronger showing in the 1950s, began the 1960s with losses however. A \$532.89 profit in 1959 was followed by deficits of \$545.02 in 1960, and \$174.17 in 1961.¹²⁶ The 1962 prom committee wanted to revive the tradition of a Freshman Glee Club concert as part of prom weekend in a parallel to Dean Carroll's references to proms of the past.¹²⁷ The higher attendance rates of the senior and freshman prom suggests that students' interest in class events was stronger when entering together and graduating together than in the junior year. As a whole, students seemed less oriented towards their class as they had been in the past, and the prom as an expression of their junior year identity thus faded. At Yale, as at Harvard, residential colleges had given students a new form of affiliation rather than class spirit. Later in the 1960s, Yale students did away with separate class proms to have one prom for the college in the hopes that combining the classes would amass enough students from different cohorts who cared about having a prom to turn a profit. As much as this may have signaled a desire for school spirit, it also denied the prom its significance as a class event.

Another sign of shifts in student culture was the attention paid by Yale's administration and prom committees to the serving of alcohol at proms. The drinking age in Connecticut during the postwar period was 21.¹²⁸ The Freshman Prom specifically negotiated contracts with fraternities to host parties with soft drinks and no alcohol.¹²⁹ Carroll acknowledged the importance of alcohol to student life when he worked with the Senior Prom committee to devise a method of providing alcohol at the event. In 1963, the Senior Prom sold chits, tickets for drinks, but this method turned out to be illegal. Additionally, the liquor ran out. Carroll examined alternatives, dismissing the possibility of allowing students to bring their own bottles because "everyone felt that the general decorum of the dance would suffer."¹³⁰ He noted the Yale reunions have participants pay one fee for open bar, but Carroll noted, "This apparently is legal, but it certainly encourages excessive drinking if people don't have to pay for the drinks one by one. ... In the long run some kind of spiked punch open to everybody and provided by the University would probably be the answer"¹³¹ The fee method though was embraced in 1965 by

¹²⁴ Edward C. Roberts, Memorandum to Mr. Gage, 23 June 1958, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²⁵ 1964 Prom Budget, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²⁶ Expenses of Freshman Promenade 1960, Central Records and Records of the Dean, Freshman Year, RU 813 Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven; and 1961 Statement of Operation, Central Records and Records of the Dean, Freshman Year, RU 813, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²⁷ Nathaniel Reed to Mr. M. Lewis Spratlan, Jr., 5 January 1962, Central Records and Records of the Dean, Freshman Year, RU 813, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹²⁸ Meghan Reilly, "Lowering the Drinking Age," *OLR Research Report*, 28 January 2009 <<http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/rpt/2009-R-0081.htm>>, Accessed 3 October 2011.

¹²⁹ Income of Freshman Promenade, 1958-1959, Central Records and Records of the Dean, RU 813, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹³⁰ Memorandum Re: Dispensing of Liquor at the Junior and Senior Proms, 7 November 1963, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹³¹ Memorandum Re: Senior Prom, 6 May 1963, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

increasing the price of prom tickets.¹³² Carroll accepted the role alcohol now played in students' lives and sought to regulate it in the name of student health and behavior as well as keeping the refinement of the prom.

Despite decreasing attendance at junior proms, student prom committees were not ready to abandon the prom before they tried creative measures to renew student interest in the prom. The 1959 junior prom committee tried holding the prom in a new location and reviving class spirit by limiting the event to juniors.¹³³ Prom committees tried embracing new trends by holding a folk-singing concert or taking the prom "psychedelic."¹³⁴ Still, the yearbook editors in 1966 chose to memorialize prom with a photograph of a bulletin board covered in notices by students selling unwanted prom tickets. Even students who had decided to buy tickets initially no longer could or cared to go. In 1968, the *Yale Daily News* noted that student attendance had dropped by one-third from the previous year.¹³⁵ While the newspaper attempted to give these numbers a positive spin by pointing out that at least 800 undergraduates still paid to attend prom, its headline was more blunt, "The Prom Dead Or Only Ailing."¹³⁶ In either case, the prom was no longer embraced by most of the student community.

The author of this article, Robert Mascia, clearly hoped that the prom was "only ailing" as he largely defended the current prom committee. He laid blame on the financing system that required the prom committee to break even but not charge faculty for tickets. Furthermore, the presence of the faculty contributed to overcrowding, and the lack of dancing space kept students from coming to the prom. Mascia clearly favored the continuation of prom because he even justified the \$500 that the prom committee spent on itself as a savings from what the previous year's committee had spent on "hotel rooms for Committee dates, free liquor, flowers, engraved jewelry, and the after-Prom party at Mory's."¹³⁷

Agreeing that the faculty would overwhelm the current venue, and the committee lacked the money to also rent an adjoining hall, President Brewster had already stepped in a few days earlier to pay for the extra space in a demonstration of the administration's support for the prom. However, not all students felt that support was warranted. An editorial in the *Yale Daily News* contended, "President Brewster's act of charity towards the Prom was a disservice to the University. It is difficult to comprehend why a 'educational' institution should sink \$3500 to \$4000 into a lavish social event which is fast becoming anachronistic." They asked, "What kind of value system sacrifices two or three potential scholarships for an evening of song and dance?" They noted that student interest did not support the costs of the prom, and that the prom failed to promote faculty-student relations since each group congregated separately according to musical tastes. Although the editors also felt that the faculty should pay, they pointed to larger issues

¹³² Memorandum from Richard Carroll, 20 April 1965, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹³³ "Yale Juniors Will Have Prom At Lawn Club," unknown newspaper, 25 February 1959, Richard C. Carroll, Assistant and Associate Dean of Yale College, Records (RU 20). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven.

¹³⁴ "Yale Students Plan Prom Friday Evening," *New Haven Register*, 26 February 1967, in Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven; Jackie Trask Gay, "Yale Promenade Goes Psychedelic," *New Haven Register*, 25 February 1968, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

¹³⁵ Jackie Trask Gay, "Yale Promenade Goes Psychedelic," *New Haven Register*, 25 February 1968, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

¹³⁶ Robert J. Mascia, "The Prom Dead Or Only Ailing," *Yale Daily News*, 23 February 1968, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

surrounding the prom: “The changing complexion of the student body, the growing visibility of college social programs, and the rising personal expenditures which a massive social affair entails are all working against the success of the Prom.”¹³⁸

The student body had changed in complexion. While still admitting many students from its traditional pool of Northeastern preparatory schools, Yale was also diversifying its student body. The editorial’s focus on Yale as an “educational” institution and valuable scholarships reveal a more academically-minded student body than that of the earlier twentieth century. Scions of the elite were still in attendance, but Yale was also cultivating students of academic excellence from other social classes. Yale also began admitting women in 1969, and their first prom as students in 1970 had a 40% decrease in number of invitations, so that fewer than 500 were invited compared to 813 the previous year.¹³⁹ While other colleges canceled their proms entirely, Yale’s lumbered on in various guises. The Yale Charities Drive revived the prom in 1974 as a means to raise money. The prom proved too expensive and sputtered to its end in 1987.¹⁴⁰ Yale has continued to have large formal events, such as the Senior Ball marking graduation, which echo the proms of the past as an event for a cohort of students.

While the prom began as a student expression, it also was ended by student expression. Students who no longer felt the prom represented their culture stopped going. Following World War II, the great expansion of higher education meant that colleges were seen less as a preserve of the elite and more as an institution granting a necessary academic credential, and the changing demographics of the student bodies on campuses contributed to this shift away from the prom. Prom committees faced with wanting to experience this traditional event and diminishing interest on the part of their peers found solace in the shared experience of their counterparts at other universities. Although college populations were being democratized, they still valued the judgment of their peers. Even at Yale where administrative support sought to assure prom’s survival, the prom surrendered to a student culture that no longer desired a large formal event.

The course of the prom’s rise and fall at universities illustrates how students oversaw the development of campus culture. They initiated and instituted the tradition of holding proms, and they built entire weekends and weeks of activities. In elevating this event in importance, students were paying tribute to themselves and their youth. The eventual widespread acceptance by adults was a recognition of youth culture. Students served on the committees that planned these events and were responsible for their success or failure. Even in the demise of the college prom, students were at the forefront. Whereas students at Marquette in the 1910s claimed the prom as integral to belonging among the universities, Yale’s editors in the late 1960s asked what the prom had to do with education, “It is a misuse of resources to subsidize an activity which contributes nothing to Yale’s educational program and which does not even have a strong appeal in the Yale community.”¹⁴¹ The prom was only a college institution while it served student culture.

Moreover, the expansion of the prom to so many American universities shows how students communicated across campuses to develop a shared culture. The transmission of prom

¹³⁸ “The Prom,” *Yale Daily News*, 20 February 1968, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

¹³⁹ “Junior Prom,” *New Haven Register*, 27 February 1970, in Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

¹⁴⁰ Judith Ann Schiff, “Old Yale: Secrets of the Spoons,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, February 1995, 96.

¹⁴¹ “The Prom,” *Yale Daily News*, 20 February 1968, Kingman Brewster Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven.

traditions from one college to another illustrates how students paid attention to other campuses and compared themselves to other students. The desire of students at a smaller university to emulate or re-imagine the customs of a larger or more prestigious university speaks to an aspirational quality in this communication. One motivation of these students was a belief in school spirit, in a desire to prove their school's worth, but another seems to have been a desire to fit in. They sought to belong to a consensus, as evidenced by Wisconsin students' survey of peers at comparable universities to see if the decline of Madison's prom was unusual or if they too were having difficulty making prom a financial success in 1956.

That desire to conform also found expression in the dominance of a fraternity-led social hierarchy throughout the prom's period of ascendancy. The prom encapsulated the uneven distribution of power and popularity among students as well as the role of wealth in determining that power. While students may have challenged that hierarchy or sought to define the prom more democratically, the prom remained associated with social status on campus. Interestingly, while the prom was at its height, it seemed to bring the student body together despite its divisions, probably due to the peer pressure of the social hierarchy. However, during the prom's decline, even though students largely shared distaste for the prom, they seemed more divided with fraternities retreating into their private formal events. These developments surrounding the proms during the late 1950s predated the divisive student cultures of the 1960s and they reflect more the changing demographics of college student populations than a rebellious spirit. The college prom, while initiated by students as an expression of their college class, could no longer appeal to a student body whose social hierarchy was undergoing atomization. The prom had succeeded by capturing the culture of students, but failed when student culture had moved on.

Chapter 2

Dancing Lessons

While college students had viewed the prom as an expression of their youth, high school students saw the prom as a taste of adulthood. At high schools around the turn of the twentieth century, students were conscious of borrowing a custom from the older, more privileged students who attended universities, and associated that event with sophistication and maturity. This association was part of the prom's appeal and was not limited to the prom. In general, dancing struck high school students as an accessible form of adult behavior. A 1919 yearbook from a Milwaukee high school included this verse titled "Society":

Mixers mixed us socially
And gave us all a chance
To try out all the latest steps
For a regular grown up dance.¹

For high school students, dancing connoted much more than the mere act of moving their bodies to music, as an examination of high schools in the areas of San Francisco, Baltimore, and Milwaukee shows. While much of their enjoyment of dancing was certainly bound up in its exuberant physicality, students also linked dancing to numerous other expressions of their approaching adult life. For the first half of the twentieth century, this identification of dancing with adulthood was prominently featured in students' writing for school publications.

This same period saw America's great expansion of secondary education. Beginning in the Progressive Era, high school enrollments steadily increased with finally a majority of fourteen to seventeen year olds receiving secondary education starting in 1930. High school was the last phase of formal education for most of these students, and represented a final period of preparation for assuming the mantle of adulthood. In gathering growing numbers of youth in their buildings, these schools became important venues for youth culture.

That culture embraced dancing as an activity that both expressed their youth and allowed them to prepare for their future, and students integrated dancing into their school lives. In addition to proms, students held dances in conjunction with many of their other extracurricular activities. A number of historians have written about how high school administrators accepted, and even encouraged, these activities as an incentive for students to stay in school as long as adults could maintain some modicum of control over them.² While keeping students in school prolonged a protected childhood, extracurriculars provided students with a way to emulate college life, a phase of life that was still sheltered but represented more independence and higher social status.

High school dances provided opportunities for students to feel grown-up. They took on adult responsibilities in organizing dances and handling finances, and students who led dancing

¹ "Society," *Comet* (West Division High School yearbook) (1919), 105.

² Two examples are Thomas Gutowski, "The High School as an Adolescent-Raising Institution: An Inner History of Chicago Public Secondary Education, 1856-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1978); and Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).

lessons garnered respect as authorities. Even as they enjoyed dancing specifically at school and with their classmates, they saw dancing as a valuable skill that would serve them throughout their adult lives. Dancing played an important role in courtship; besides the sexual connotations of a boy and girl paired in rhythmic motion, dancing was a popular date activity and dancing skill added to one's appeal to the opposite sex.

Dancing also represented refinement to high school students. The emulation of collegiate customs was not the only sign that students aspired to a future of mingling with the elite. School newspapers mimicked society columns by reporting on classmates dancing around town, and students were able to imagine themselves as socialites. In their attitudes toward dancing and thoughts about growing up, students revealed not only an awareness of themselves undergoing a transition to adulthood, but also hopes for a bright future of social mobility. For these students, if school was preparing them for their adult lives, so were their extracurricular dancing activities preparing them for the lives they imagined and desired for themselves. The prom was the apotheosis of this coupling of adulthood and social status.

High school students looked to colleges as a model for student life. They found the elaborate rituals and numerous clubs of college students so fascinating that they wrote short stories glorifying campus life – the sports, the camaraderie, and the romances – in their schools' literary journals of the 1910s and 1920s. Those journals were themselves a conscious copy of publications produced by college students. Upon creating their high school's first yearbook, students at Milwaukee's West Division High School wrote in 1898, "A book of this sort from a high school may demand a word of explanation. We beg pardon of our collegiate betters for presuming to enter their field."³ These words show a reverence for college students and a desire to be like them. College students' air of privilege added to their appeal. As limited as enrollments in high school were around the turn of the twentieth century, colleges were even more exclusive. High school students sought to adopt different aspects of college culture and embraced extracurricular activities. This emulation of college life took shape through student fraternities, athletic events, class spirit, and especially the many dances surrounding those activities. In transposing this college culture to their own schools, high school students made extracurriculars, and aspiration, a standard part of their adolescent experience.

High school fraternities, though short-lived, serve as a clear example of high school students modeling themselves after college students. In the early twentieth century, many school yearbooks devoted pages to various fraternities, which then boasted of their successful dances and parties. These younger students identified these social events as an integral part of fraternity life. Baltimore City College's Pi Delta Pi fraternity noted in 1920, "Perhaps the most outstanding success that we have achieved so far is the dance which our Gamma Chapter held at Community Hall on November 19. It was well attended, both by our chapter, its friends, and the Kappa Chapter."⁴ Dances were a point of pride for these boys as well as a gesture of independence. The dance was an event they held on their own, away from school, and they were able to take on adult responsibilities. In announcing the high level of attendance, the boys expected their peers to appreciate this measure of the event's success.

Just as college fraternity members frequently became campus celebrities, high school yearbooks featured their school's fraternity members prominently. One yearbook poked fun at a fraternity member, Barger, with a joke about his clumsiness on the dance floor.

³ *Hesper* (West Division) (1898), 3.

⁴ "The Pi Delta Pi Fraternity," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), December 1920, 28.

At the Sigma Phi Dance:

Barger – Excellent dance floor this.

Unlucky Partner – Then for goodness sake why dance on my feet?⁵

Students writing the yearbook would have expected their classmates to recognize the fraternities and their members to find entertainment in teasing a particular boy about his dancing skills. Although fraternities died out or went underground at high schools with administrative bans on them in the late 1920s, they illustrate how high school students patterned their social lives after those of college students and integrated dances into that emulation.

High school athletic teams also drew inspiration from collegiate culture; just as college students surrounded athletic events, particularly football, with multiple social activities, high school students held dances to commemorate games. Dances celebrating the football team were widespread and continued past the decline of fraternities. In one example of football's dominance, Mission High School's dance committee in 1943 kicked off its series of Friday night dances with a dance dedicated to the football team and sponsored by the Boy's Block 'M' Society, the lettermen's club, and the Girls' League Cabinet.⁶

The homecoming weekend, an annual event at many colleges, also became popular in high schools. In Milwaukee, on the night before their school's football game, students often participated in a traditional "snake dance," in which they locked hands with their classmates and wove through town in a long line up and down the streets and hills. Although this dance did not involve particular steps, it did turn coordinated movement into a community ritual. After a Saturday morning parade, and the afternoon game, the homecoming dance followed in the gym, which was often decorated in harvest themes or athletic imagery, such as a football field.⁷ For two of Baltimore's all-male high schools, Baltimore City College and Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, their football rivalry prompted each school to hold an optimistically-named Victory Dance after the football game for current students and alumni. The annual Victory Dance was the biggest event of the year, with each claiming the highest attendance numbers of any other school event, and they formed part of an entire weekend of activities. With such dances drawing in large crowds of alumni, these events reinforced school ties and promoted the idea of dancing as an activity greatly enjoyed by adults as well as youth.

At high schools across the country, football gave rise to more prominent social events than other sports, which were only sporadically celebrated with dances. In the 1930s, the Boys' Glee Club at Wauwatosa High School, located in a Milwaukee suburb, regularly sponsored a basketball hop following a game. The largest of these events was in 1939 when 400 Wauwatosa students gathered at Club Sahara after a basketball game to dance to a live band accompanied by singers. They danced first after the game and then held a pep event from 10pm to midnight, and then started dancing again with even the principal joining in the jitterbug.⁸ However, this basketball hop tradition was intermittent and fleeting. In adopting athletic traditions from colleges, high schools also adopted the social activities surrounding sporting events. Just as college students prioritized football, that sport received greater emphasis in high school social

⁵ "Jokes," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), December 1920, 30.

⁶ "Friday Dances," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 3, 1943, 1.

⁷ "Homecoming Program Is Arranged," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa High School), October 22, 1926, 1.

⁸ "400 Tosans laugh, Applaud, Drink Cokes at Tosa Sahara Night," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), January 19, 1939, 3.

life. Homecoming, and similar football-related events, thus saw dances tied to these borrowed collegiate customs as a new high school tradition.

A significant part of the social life surrounding athletics was the sense of school spirit, of which class spirit was a variation. Like college students, high school students not only identified with their school, but also their class year. Students in high school formed an identity based on their grade level, and they sought to express pride in that identity. Students enshrined their class affiliation with tokens like a class pin, hat, sweater, or color. Each class met in assemblies to debate and then vote on these items, with boys and girls each receiving his or her own hats and sweaters. In some schools, classes voted on a new color each year, so that each grade of high school experience was marked by a new color. Students viewed these items as public symbols of their class pride.

Furthermore, following the patterns of college students, high school students believed in using these markers to enforce a social hierarchy that upheld deference to older students. At San Francisco's Mission High School, the newspaper noted the new hats of the senior girls: "The high senior girls are reviving their fez, to top their already lofty craniums, and to remind the wearers of the yellow tams that the higher the station, the higher the hat."⁹ While student writers assumed a joking tone in describing this deference, the frequency with which school newspapers referred to seniors as "high and mighties," and described freshmen and sophomores as "lowly," suggests that students accepted this social hierarchy. Administrators reinforced this hierarchy by giving greater privileges to the upper classes; Baltimore high schools only allowed juniors and seniors to host dances at school while Mission High School in San Francisco allowed sophomores to hold dances as well as upperclassmen, but did not extend the privilege to freshmen. Class pride could also take the form of competition. In 1927, a Mission High School competition to contribute tin foil and compete with other San Francisco schools was organized by class, so that seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshmen would compete against each other. Student reporters teased seniors about getting shown up by younger classmen as a way of goading upperclassmen into demonstrating their superiority by giving more. Students translated their grade levels into class identities that formed the basis for a social hierarchy.

At schools nationwide, students commonly showed class spirit by holding events just for members of their class. This tradition was most popular from the late 1920s to 1950s when classes at Mission High School in San Francisco often held their own wienie roasts and swimming or skating parties. "Seniors Hike, Skate As Proof of Class Spirit," read one headline from the school's newspaper in 1935.¹⁰ Seniors at Mission High School also enjoyed the tradition of Baby Day, when they dressed in baby costumes, played childhood games in a nearby park, and had their own luncheon. This reversion to an earlier childhood in these games symbolized how seniors had given up that phase of life and were ready for the next one, when they would assume their adult stations in life. Baltimore City College's February 1951 graduates organized a closed boat ride, a swim and dance, as well as a Christmas party at the Hotel Stafford.¹¹ School newspapers frequently posted bulletins from each class announcing their upcoming events.

Of all the various class activities, students were most enthusiastic about their dances; a 1927 article from Mission High School lists a wienie roast and luncheon parties held by one

⁹ "High Senior Election," *Mission Chimes* (Mission High School), March 18, 1927, 1.

¹⁰ "Seniors Hike, Skate As Proof of Class Spirit," *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 12, 1935, 1.

¹¹ "Feb. Seniors Leave With Good Record," *The Collegian* (Baltimore City College), January 26, 1951, 1.

class, “but the best of all the activities was the dance given Friday, January 7.”¹² Students arranged class mixers to encourage feelings of class spirit by promoting students’ familiarity with their classmates. These mixers featured organized games to match students up with new dance partners, and student editorials asserted the importance of such events. An editorial from Wauwatosa High School in Wisconsin described how dance organizers encouraged students to meet new classmates, “The main object of a mixer is to see how many different people one can dance with. Therefore after the first ten dances, all those people who had danced with ten or more partners, and had proof of it on their programs were awarded prizes.”¹³ At Milwaukee’s South Division High School, another editorial asked, “Seniors! Do you know everyone in your class? Would you like to?” The student editors polled graduating seniors and graduates to find that “the average student knew less than half of the class at graduation time” and that seniors felt there ought to be a senior mixer at the start of their last semester to encourage further mingling. The editors concluded, “A gathering of this nature would acquaint one with his classmates and would create a spirit of friendliness and good will among the seniors.”¹⁴ Knowing one’s classmates was a measure of class pride, and student-held mixers where students danced with their classmates promoted that familiarity.

The success of a dance, as gauged by attendance and ticket sales, was a source of pride for student cohorts, and they gave serious thought to how to ensure a positive outcome. Just as students met in assemblies to vote on class symbols, they also met in assemblies to discuss class dances. At the all-male Baltimore City College, the senior class of 1921 took a poll over whether the class should hold a dance:

A slip of paper, bearing a pledge to back up our president if the dance was to be held, was given to each member present. Before distributing the slips, Pepters [the president] warned the fellows that whoever did not intend to support him should say so on the paper. Judging by the number of members that signed the pledges, the class is with him, heart and soul, and we shall have a successful dance this year.¹⁵

Thus these boys considered attendance at these dances and willingness to take on financial obligations to be demonstrations of support for their class officers, and they sought to guarantee their dance’s success with these pledges. The sophomore class at Mission High School held a successful dance in 1926 with a country schoolhouse theme and entertainments; seven-eighths of the class attended the dance, attesting to their enthusiasm for dancing but also for their class spirit.¹⁶ Class pride sometimes expressed itself as envy over another class’ event. Most often lowerclassmen lamented their exclusion from events held by upperclassmen; one humor column in Mission High School’s newspaper read, “Want ads. Wanted: A Bid to the Senior Dance ... A freshman.”¹⁷ This line teased Mission’s freshmen for lacking, not only permission to hold events of their own, but also the social status of seniors.

¹² “Low Seniors Complete Many Social Affairs,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), January 19, 1927, 1.

¹³ “Good Mixers Prove Their Qualities,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 8, 1931, 1.

¹⁴ “Senior Mixers Create Atmosphere of Friendliness,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), January 17, 1941, 2.

¹⁵ “1921 Class News” and “1922 Class News,” *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), February 1921, 26.

¹⁶ “1B and 2A Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 3, 1926, 1.

¹⁷ “Want ads,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 29, 1924, 2.

Occasionally, classes hosted events for the whole school. In March 1927, Mission High School's senior class held a skating party and invited the whole student body. In students' views, a successful all-school event conferred honor to the sponsoring class. Each class tried to make unique bids, or decorations, to set off their social achievement. In numerous high schools, each class was responsible for hosting a particular dance for the whole school. At Baltimore City College, juniors sponsored the Cherry Hop, and seniors organized the Autumn Hop as well as the Victory Hop each year. Wauwatosa High School juniors were in charge of the Christmas dance while Mission High School seniors were responsible for holding an annual welcome reception and dance for freshmen at the beginning of the school year as early as 1924.¹⁸ Classes prided themselves on how well these events came off and the good time had by their guests from other classes. Baltimore Polytechnic juniors were only allowed to hold one event each year, so they were determined to make it a success that "will be remembered for many years to come."¹⁹ They believed that part of their legacy lay in their reputation for these dances.

In adopting these customs from college life, high school students did not simply transpose an extant youth culture to their own environment, but expressed their aspirations toward adulthood and social status in their emulation of these collegiate traditions. Believing the activities of college students to be a representation of adulthood reveals considerable naïveté on the part of high school students, yet it also shows that among the things that high school students valued about adulthood were greater independence and a chance to display sophistication. These imitations of college culture not only contributed to a robust high school social life, but also to a sense that students were familiarizing themselves with the behavior of more refined circles.

It was in this environment that prom arrived and took root in high schools. High school students were interested in mirroring the customs of college students. Along with expressing class spirit, the prom was an opportunity for high school students to convey their own sophistication. While the rhetoric surrounding class spirit diminished in these high schools after 1950, the high school prom endured and remained a formal event associated with junior or senior year. Even though students no longer held class events with such regularity and newspapers no longer rallied students in the name of class rivalry, they continued to commemorate their class affiliation in the prom.

In importing many of these college customs for their dances, high school students had to take initiative to organize these events. Even though they had to secure adult approval, they got to make decisions about how their events would take place. For all their dances and not just the prom, they practiced skills of leadership, budgeting, and responsibility, which they connected to adult life. Dances were a useful tool as well as an enjoyable event; students frequently held dances explicitly to raise funds for a student organization or class through ticket and refreshment sales. These funds also occasionally went toward prom expenses. Students recognized this dual purpose of dances to the extent that Baltimore City College's 1951 yearbook titled its page about the school's social calendar, "Dances for Fun and Finance."²⁰ Through organizing dances in the sheltered environment of high school, students tried on adult roles.

Students took the fundraising goals of dances seriously. School newspapers regularly reported on the profits made from dances and how those profits would be used. In the 1920s,

¹⁸ "The Freshmen Reception," *West Wing* (Mission High School), February 21, 1924, 1.

¹⁹ "Juniors At Work on Class Dance; Date Set As December 23," *Poly Press* (Baltimore Polytechnic Institute), November 14, 1932, 1.

²⁰ "Dances for Fun and Finance," *The Greenbag* (Baltimore City College) (1951), 117.

when schools began publishing weekly or biweekly broadsheets rather than monthly magazines, these financial reports appeared at schools in all three cities. Students drew upon class spirit to raise money for their class activities. At Mission High School in San Francisco, a student article about profits from dances in 1939 justified the practice of charging for dances rather than providing free entry with student dues. “Each class – high senior through low sophomore – will have the opportunity to sponsor a dance, and the profits will go into the treasury of that particular class.” The paper specifically said that the high seniors already threw the first dance of the season and broke down the total income and expenses thus:

Receipts

Student Tickets \$72.50

Guest Tickets \$19.00

Soft Drinks \$34.00

Total receipts \$125.50

Expenses

Decorations \$17.90

Drinks \$17.72

Total expenses \$35.62

Net profit for high senior class \$89.88²¹

While not every dance received such detailed coverage of its budget, the school newspaper thought it was worthwhile for students to know how much the organizers spent and earned on different items. That some students were paying attention to these budgets suggests that students cared about responsibly managing these affairs. The article presumed that the seniors would use their profits for prom or graduation expenses, and commended them for working hard to staff the event and for supplying classmates to man the record player, coke machines, and cloakroom, and put up decorations. The paper thus implied that the seniors, by making these efforts, deserved the money that would allow them to afford the pleasures of prom or graduation. Dances thus instilled or emphasized certain values of work.

In fact, student organizers publicized these financial goals as an added incentive for classmates to attend dances – even if a student was not sufficiently persuaded by the prospect of a dance, maybe that student could be convinced by knowing the profits were going toward something else of interest. In the case of the 1939 senior dance at Mission High School, a further justification of charging for student dances, instead of including them with student dues, was that “the student body card money can be used for other things. More dances can be held because the funds are not so limited, and best of all for you, each class will be able to have more activities of their own as their treasury grows and grows and grows.”²² Gathering money through holding dances was a viable way for student groups to afford additional activities, and the image of a growing treasury highlights the youths’ pride in their business sense. Similarly, the school paper at Mission High School sponsored afternoon dances annually to raise money for its costs from the 1920s onward. Editors urged students in 1924, “In preparing for this dance, the staff had in mind only one thing – and that one was YOU. We gave this dance for YOUR pleasure, and the

²¹ “Price for dances is profit making,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 6, 1939, 1.

²² Ibid.

funds taken in are to go towards making YOUR school paper bigger and better next term.”²³ Not only would students enjoy a fun dance, but they would also gain an improved school newspaper. Student groups thus couched dances as a service to the student body, and students could contribute by attending.

Sometimes profits from one dance or other activities were funneled into holding more dances. Students occasionally held other types of events to raise money for putting on a dance, such as the Tri-Y club’s wienie roast which raised money to sponsor their dance at Guadalupe Hall.²⁴ Seniors held dances to raise money for graduation activities and particularly proms. In 1945, Mission High School seniors held a Barn Dance whose entire proceeds were to go toward the Senior Prom.²⁵ In Wauwatosa High School outside of Milwaukee, as at many other schools, each of the upper classes held a play in order to raise money, and students were very clear about the importance of putting those profits toward their proms. One student article from 1926 asked whether Wauwatosa should have a junior and senior play or have two senior plays. The reporter reasoned, “If the Junior play is abandoned, it will mean that the Juniors will have to procure money from another source for the Junior Prom. However, the Juniors should remember that they will be Seniors next year, and so they will want to participate in the Senior Play.”²⁶ That year’s calendar did not have room for all three plays, and with limited opportunities for fundraising, students had to strategize about maximizing those opportunities and consider whether they wanted money toward prom or wanted to defer that income until their senior year and put it toward graduation expenses. In making these decisions, students experienced a limited autonomy.

To exhort students to attend these dances, school newspapers often ran editorials suggesting students had a duty to support the dances’ various causes. Mission High School’s student editors frequently used students’ school spirit as a way of encouraging students to support the newspaper’s dances. Advertising revenue failed to cover all the newspaper’s costs, and thus student journalism relied on ticket sales to augment its budget. Editors asked, “Have you ever considered the fact that the ‘Chimes’ is an advertiser of our ‘Mission Spirit?’ ... The bids ... will show to the students that you are a Mission student with real Mission spirit.”²⁷ The editorial emphasized the support given to other activities by the newspaper as a reminder of readers’ debt to student journalism. Thus attending the newspaper’s dance was both an opportunity and an obligation for students to express their loyalty and pride in their school. At South Division High School in Milwaukee, the seniors held a dance for all students, and the school’s newspaper took a similar tack to encourage attendance, “Since the proceeds go to pay for the Annual, every pupil, regardless of his dancing ability, should be present at each dance.”²⁸ The widely-held desire for a yearbook obliged students to attend.

This appeal to students’ sense of duty was especially present in the dances students held to benefit charities. Mission High School’s Tinfoil Club held annual dances from the late 1920s to the early 1930s. Students gathered tinfoil and brought it to the dance to contribute to the tin foil drive, which raised money “to aid handicapped students at Mission who find it necessary to go to a hospital for treatment or operations.”²⁹ The student club would only put on the dance if

²³ “West Wing Dance A Success,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), June 18, 1924, 1.

²⁴ “Annual Tri-Y Dance Held At Guadalupe Hall Jan. 3,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), January 16, 1947, 1.

²⁵ “St. Francis to Be Scene of Senior Prom,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 27, 1945, 1.

²⁶ “Shall we have a Senior or Junior play,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 20, 1926, 1.

²⁷ “Chimes Dance,” *Mission Chimes* (Mission High School), November 10, 1927, 2.

²⁸ “Senior Dance,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), April 26, 1929, 2.

²⁹ “Tinfoil Club Plans Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), February 20, 1931, 2.

enough tin foil were gathered, so the dance served as a prize or an incentive for charity.³⁰ Baltimore City College also began holding an annual charity dance in the late 1940s, when students started turning over proceeds from their Christmas dance to various charities. These dances built on the fundraising skills students developed in other dances, and the emphasis on helping others further legitimized these activities. Dancing was the responsible course of action when it was for charity.

Adults also capitalized on students' willingness to dance to raise money for their causes. For example, the Parent-Teacher Association at San Francisco's Mission High School held a dance in the boys' gymnasium in order to raise money for the library and music department and buy uniforms for the band. The school newspaper supported the dance, "Students, show your spirit and make possible these much-to-be-desired objects."³¹ In Racine, Wisconsin, the Junior Chamber of Commerce sponsored dances in the late 1940s to support the March of Dimes drive, and placed advertisements in the school newspaper.³² Student reporters also described how much it cost to deal with the effects of polio and cited the profits raised by a previous dance to persuade students to attend. Thus students were supposed to attend, not just because they wanted to dance, but also because they hoped to help. In this way, adults and students used dances to instill values of charity as well as call upon school spirit, and certainly students' support for these charitable causes went toward securing adult approval for so many dances.

Despite the fact that much of this fundraising went toward school activities, these dances also gave students a window into adulthood. To hold dances, some students had to handle finances in a responsible manner and take on leadership roles. They honed their business skills by planning events, marketing, and calculating profits. They also expressed responsibility in valuing charity and called upon the class and school spirit adopted from college student culture. Students who attended dances may have done so to have a good time, but they may also have felt the pull of school pride or charity. In addition to practicing these skills for adulthood, being able to make these decisions represented a form of autonomy while under the watchful eyes of teachers and administrators. While the prom alone was considered a rite of passage, students had already made associations between holding school dances and the approach of adulthood.

Beyond the skills involved in planning a dance, students believed that dancing itself would be an asset in adulthood; when they pictured their lives after high school, they saw a future in which knowing how to dance would benefit them. School newspapers frequently argued that students should learn to dance. An editorial from 1941 asked, "Might it not be possible to make learning to dance required in P.E. and ROTC classes? After all West Point and Annapolis in recognition of the importance of this social grace require all students learn to dance." In citing these prominent all-male schools, students expressed a desire to measure up to elite standards and underscored that dancing was as much a masculine pursuit as a feminine one. The same editorial expressed concern about wallflowers, suggesting, "A special dance committee should be appointed to solve the wall-flower situation. This committee would see to it that students who don't know how to dance should learn how so that at future dances they could participate in the fun."³³ They noted that students learned dancing in their senior year, presumably in preparation for prom, but also proposed having square dances that would let everyone participate and break

³⁰ "Tinfoil Dance To Be Held If Drive Proves Success," *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 26, 1931, 3.

³¹ "P.T.A. dance to be Held Tonight in Boys' Gym.," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 7, 1928, 1.

³² "Hold Dance Jan. 31 For March of Dimes," *The Park Beacon* (Racine High School), January 23, 1948, 1.

³³ "Wall Flower Situation a Problem," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 9, 1941, 2.

up partners, saying this could “obliterate” the wall-flowers who were afraid to dance. These editors’ concern appeared to be partly that wallflowers felt left out because they could not dance with their classmates, but some concern also seemed to stem from a belief that dancing was an important skill. If elite military colleges thought dancing was important enough to require it, then high school students should also seek to learn it as well and prepare themselves for adulthoods where dancing would be valued.

Therefore students at many high schools tried various methods to entice wallflowers to attend and participate in dances. By featuring entertainments, such as a talent show segment or local celebrities, student leaders hoped to offer something for classmates who did not dance. This was explicitly the reason for including entertainment at the Freshmen Reception in 1924 at Mission High School, which the high and low seniors joined together to welcome incoming freshmen. The Mission student newspaper noted that “in the past this reception consisted of only a dance, but the committee in charge finds that due, either to bashfulness or inability, most of the freshman did not receive the full benefit of the good time intended for them. So, by giving an entertainment as well as dance everyone will be able to enjoy themselves [stet] as intended.”³⁴ For this inclusive class event, the seniors aimed to please the whole student body with entertainment. Still, dance organizers thought having all the students dancing would make their events more of a success. They included organized activities, like the square dance, which would ease students into dancing without their needing to know many specific steps, or facilitated introductions among students through partner-switching games. In 1931, Mission seniors held a dance in which the students were divided into groups, each with an assigned color, so that students could meet each other, and “if the boys were too bashful to ask the girls to dance, the process was reversed, because the girls were obliged to ask the boys to favor them with a dance.”³⁵

The tactic of having girls ask boys to dance suggests that student writers saw the wallflower problem as primarily the result of male ignorance of dancing or shyness. Mission High School’s editors described how “senior masculine wall-flowers cling bashfully around the dance floor watching with sorrowful eyes as couples pass by gracefully,” and urged them to take lessons.³⁶ Five years later, the school’s newspaper editors published an editorial in 1936 proposing a “novice dance” as a “remedy for wallflowers” by providing dancing lessons onsite. The editorial also urged students who did not know how to dance to learn from a sister or girlfriend or to just try.³⁷ Student leaders hoped to bring more male students into dances by teaching them the skills they needed to succeed. While students focused on having classmates learn to dance, they also believed they were helping their classmates enjoy themselves and acquire social grace.

Student editors suggested that students take formal dance lessons. Their editorials placed pressure on classmates to attend the dances, with one from Mission High School chastising, “The dances this term thus far have not been patronized very well, and at nearly every dance you see the same faces. What’s the matter with the rest of the students?”³⁸ The editors then expressed concern that students were not attending because they could not dance, rather than because they did not want to, and suggested that students turn to the local dance studios that advertised in the

³⁴ “The Freshmen Reception,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), February 21, 1924, 1.

³⁵ “Bashful Senior Students Are Taught Dancing,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 8, 1931, 1.

³⁶ “Senior Boys Taught Latest Dance Steps,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 17, 1933, 1.

³⁷ “Novice Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), September 21, 1936, 2.

³⁸ “Let’s All Learn,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 13, 1934 Mission, 2.

school newspaper for lessons. While the editorial served as a form of peer pressure in implying that something might be wrong with students who did not attend dances, the conformity it sought was not in relation to an idea of their youthfulness, but to a conceptualization of adulthood in connection with dancing.

“Why Have We No Dancing Lessons?” asked the student editors at West Division High School in Milwaukee. Their editorial described a recent dance where “a casual survey indicates that a majority of the boys did not attend because they did not know how to dance.” Noting that football, basketball, and other sports were part of the high school curriculum, the editors asked whether that athletic education was of as much practical use to students after high school as dancing would be. The editorial posited, “Eighty per cent of young people leaving secondary schools will enjoy dancing for many years. For this reason dancing should be taught somewhere in the required two years of gym. In addition to actual dancing technique, the social value of courtesy and poise, which dancing instruction would include, cannot be questioned.”³⁹ These editors, viewing themselves as student leaders and perhaps as collaborators with the school administration, believed that dancing was a practical thing to learn and would serve students greatly in their future. Promoting the cultivation of courtesy and poise highlights students’ desire to feel comfortable mingling in higher strata of society after graduating from high school. The school newspapers further sought to encourage more of the student body to dance by printing instructions for dance steps. Mission High School ran a column “Let’s Dance” in 1945 featuring the steps for the Rhumba and the Cuban Walk.⁴⁰ Baltimore City College student editors also printed illustrations for different dances. Student editors thus took up the issue of students learning to dance.

Students went so far as to organize their own lessons at school. South Division High School in Milwaukee held dance lessons as early as 1915, and students believed these lessons produced greater enjoyment among the student body: “The proverbial wallflowers were absent and every one present was dancing every dance, or nearly so. The success of this dance was due to the fact that many took lessons ‘in training their feet,’ before venturing into the Gym., on Thursday.”⁴¹ This practice of holding dance lessons at school remained popular through the early 1940s with schools offering the most lessons during the 1930s, perhaps because fewer students could afford lessons at dance studios during the Great Depression. Mission High School’s 1940 senior dance committee saw these lessons as their first priority: “Plans for holding high senior dancing classes are already under way and the committee is working hard on the shrinking violets, don’t-know-how-to-dance problem. As soon as that’s out of the way, they’ll get busy on the Prom.”⁴²

Teaching the seniors to dance was an important step toward a successful prom, and this emphasis on preparing students for prom reflected the event’s status as a rite of passage in the minds of youth. If students’ dancing lessons and the other school dances were practice for adulthood, prom was the dress rehearsal. One article from Mission High School explained the reason for dance classes as being so “al[l] the high seniors that attend the dancing class may find more enjoyment at the senior prom.”⁴³ In 1941, students at the same school announced dance lessons this way: “Once upon a time came a Senior Prom, and Joe Senior, and Judy Senior did

³⁹ “Why Have We No Dancing Lessons?” *The Comet* (West Division), November 20, 1940, 2.

⁴⁰ “Let’s Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 21, 1945, 2.

⁴¹ “Girls’ Club Entertains at Christmas Party,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), December 17, 1915, 1.

⁴² “Senior Group Names Dance Representatives,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 18, 1940, 3.

⁴³ “Doin’ That Senior Walk, Dancers Meet in Gym,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 4, 1938, 3.

not go, not on account of their two ugly, cruel step-sisters, but because they could not dance. To make it possible for every senior to learn to dance, a before-school class has been organized.”⁴⁴ Students viewed dance lessons as a potential equalizer, an opportunity that ought to be made available to any senior who wanted to learn. In a way, students’ rhetoric about dance lessons followed arguments for democratizing access to secondary education. Milwaukee’s West Division juniors agreed, “All juniors intend by early June to master the essentials of gliding smoothly across the floor to the muted strains of an orchestra arrangement of popular numbers.”⁴⁵ These lessons would be held until prom time when they could demonstrate what they had learned. While dancing to certain music, such as swing, was associated primarily with youth, even in 1943, lessons at Racine High School in Wisconsin emphasized other dances: “Miss Reiland has been teaching such intricate steps as the waltz, the toddle, and others requiring skill and grace plus a wee fragment of intelligence.”⁴⁶ Students attended lessons to learn these older dances that they saw as having more sophistication so that they would be prepared for the dance most highly associated with adulthood, the prom. These preparations for prom show its place as the pinnacle of student social life and as the epitome of students’ wider notions connecting dancing and adulthood.

Students may partly have emphasized dancing as an asset in adulthood because of teachers’ involvement in promoting dance lessons. In helping to organize these lessons, teachers gave their approval to dancing as a worthwhile activity. At Milwaukee’s South Division High School in 1926, a teacher was involved in teaching students the two-step, and in other schools, teachers not only oversaw lessons, but played a part in encouraging students to take lessons.⁴⁷ Miss Theo Donnelly at West Division High School enthused to students attending a dance lesson in 1940, “During the next week think music in time to everything you do. You’ll be in the swing of it in no time at all.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, teacher involvement and approval was necessary to schedule many of these lessons, which occurred not just before or after school, but even during class periods in some schools. Again, most lessons focused on teaching boys how to dance. Mission High School had special dancing lessons for their ROTC students. The senior advisor, Miss B.K. Acheson, said,

Imagine a boy who has for the last three years been drilled into stepping off with his left foot first, trying to take two steps to the right first and then two steps to the left, at the same time laboring to dismiss from his ever working mind the rules of keeping abreast of the person next to him, of always keeping in step, of covering in file the man in front of him, etc., etc.⁴⁹

Also at Mission High School, another teacher expressed his hope that these lessons would promote “a large turnout for the graduation dance.”⁵⁰ Teachers thus were invested in seeing many students at the dances, and thought dancing was important for youth to learn.

These lessons also allowed students to act as teachers themselves by instructing their classmates in dancing. In Milwaukee’s West Division High School, “Rosemari Dax, secretary of

⁴⁴ “Sob Story – To Dance Or Not to Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 13, 1941, 2.

⁴⁵ “‘I Can’t Dance’ Won’t Be Valid Excuse for June 8,” *The Comet* (West Division), May 8, 1940, 3.

⁴⁶ “Boys Progress In Dance Group,” *The Park Beacon* (Racine High School), December 3, 1943, 1.

⁴⁷ “Gym Students Dance,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), October 1, 1926, 3.

⁴⁸ “‘I Can’t Dance’ Won’t Be Valid Excuse for June 8,” *The Comet* (West Division), May 8, 1940, 3.

⁴⁹ “R. O. Seniors to Learn Dancing,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), February 9, 1932, 3.

⁵⁰ “High Senior Boys Learn Dancing,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 19, 1931, 3.

the junior class, began a class in dancing instructions open for all boys in room 6 Friday, April 26, at 3:10. First Rosemari taught the group to walk forward and backward in time to the music. Then she taught them a simple fox-trot. Betty Jacobs was at the piano.”⁵¹ In teaching their classmates this skill, these students were themselves practicing adult behaviors and acting as authorities. Even in classes taught by teachers, the newspaper articles mentioned girls volunteering to help teach boys to dance by serving as their partners. Even though the lessons would not provide much more than instruction in rudimentary steps, students realized that they could learn from each other. In Racine, Wisconsin, the high school newspaper noted, “Steps taught in the class, however, are only those necessary to merely get along on the floor, so if some of the girls expect the boys to boogie-woogie with them they’d better instruct the boys themselves.”⁵² While students teaching each other may reflect an insular peer culture, it also demonstrates that they saw themselves as people with authority and skills to be shared with classmates.

As much as girls believed that boys needed to learn how to dance, female students also believed it necessary to practice dancing themselves, even in all-girl environments. For all-girl high schools or clubs, hosting girl-only dances were an expression of girls’ desires to dance, but also a stage of practicing for when they would dance with male partners. Baltimore City College’s newspaper published a report from the all-female Western High School which said, “The Seniors are going to have weekly afternoon dances in our Music Room until the end of the year. The dances are for those who merely want to dance and for those who want to know how to do so. The first one was held on February the fourteenth, and the girls were very much pleased with its success.”⁵³ The girls’ schools generally called these tea dances, presumably because they were held in the afternoon around tea time after the school day ended. At these dances, girls partnered and taught each other, and they practiced their dancing skills for the few times a year when they exchanged dance invitations with Baltimore’s all-male Polytechnic Institute and City College. Thus dancing was a skill for courtship; even as boys and girls enjoyed dancing as an activity, they also viewed dancing as an asset in dating. More frequently, these exchanges between schools took the form of tea dances to which the girls invited the boys from one school, and occasionally the boys’ schools would reciprocate with an invitation to dance at their school. When the boys’ schools held dances, they also selected girls to act as hostesses for some of their general dances in a gesture toward a traditional role for adult women.

Even at coed high schools, girls organized dances for themselves. In San Francisco, Mission High School’s Executive Board of Girls’ Physical Education held a party for entering female students. 380 girls attended, and students learned the school’s yells and songs, and then “the remainder of the time was spent in dancing, to the merry tunes produced by Viola Novis at the piano, Suzanne McCarte with her saxophone, and Martha Linderstrand with the cornet.”⁵⁴ Girls had their own gym class at Mission High School, and the last few minutes of fifth-period girls’ gym class at Mission High School were when “Miss Mulcahy, their instructor, permits her class to devote a few minutes to ballroom dancing. The girls choose a different partner for each dance, which is the usual procedure.” The school newspaper listed the different dances the girls were learning, while one girl played the piano for others to dance to.⁵⁵ All-girl dances at co-ed

⁵¹ “‘I Can’t Dance’ Won’t Be Valid Excuse for June 8,” *The Comet* (West Division), May 8, 1940, 3.

⁵² “Boys Progress In Dance Group,” *The Park Beacon* (Racine High School), December 3, 1943, 1.

⁵³ “Western News,” *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), March 1922, 28.

⁵⁴ “Party Given in Honor of New Girl Students,” *Mission Chimes* (Mission High School), March 4, 1927, 1.

⁵⁵ “Girls Dance During Fifth Period Class,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 18, 1932, 2.

schools were most popular from the late 1910s to early 1930s when girls clubs were most active at these schools. With names like the Red Arrow Club, Anna Copeland Club, or just Girls' Club, female students organized themselves and held their own dances. Mission's Girls' Club held a maypole dance each spring in the late 1910s for girls only, and the Anna Copeland Club at Wauwatosa High School had its own dances for girls.⁵⁶

Similar to the girls' schools, these girls' clubs also generally held one dance each year when each member could invite the boy of her choice. Red Arrow girls had the first mixer of the year, and also sponsored the Homecoming celebrations. Boys were evidently eager to receive invitations to these dances, like the Merrill Club's annual dance where girls invited boys at Milwaukee's West Division High School. Girls thus acted as hostesses, practicing a traditional feminine art. The girls' club at Milwaukee's South Division High School held a Christmas dance, and the newspaper boasted, "To tell the honest truth not very many of the boys were missing, either."⁵⁷ While the level of male enthusiasm was presumably related to an invitation's reflection of a boy's social status, it also implied that boys too enjoyed dancing. Girls also could invite boys when schools held a Turnabout dance, or Sadie Hawkins Dance. This was a regular feature at many schools, especially around Valentine's Day. Mission High School's newspaper spoke of one in April 1940, "No chance for a boy to ask a girl for a dance at this affair. From beginning to end, the girls held sway, and it was they who dated the boys and 'tagged' other girls at the dance."⁵⁸ In this way, girls were permitted to step outside of prevailing dating norms and exercise the power of choice, albeit in a controlled school setting.

Looking back on these all-girl dances, fifty years later, one alumna from all-female Western High School's class of 1936 recalled, "The 'Tea Dances' were silly, with girls dancing with girls."⁵⁹ She said their social lives would have been better if they could have partnered with a boys' school at every dance. Yet in stating her preference for dancing with boys, she acknowledged that part of students' enthusiasm for dancing was that it provided a permissible way to be close to members of the opposite sex. While students did not explicitly discuss the sexual nature of dancing in their school publications, a conception of sex as an adult activity and dancing as a hormonal release surely contributed to their views tying dancing with adulthood. Even without directly addressing the sexual attraction felt in dancing, youth related dancing to the process of growing up in numerous ways. From a belief that dancing would serve them later in life, when they might socialize with more privileged classes, student editors championed dance lessons. Students who taught their classmates took on the adult role of instructor. Through all-girls' dances and clubs, female students practiced for real dates with boys and rehearsed feminine skills and social graces, like hostessing. Their adult lives, as students envisaged them, would be richer for this dancing experience at high school.

Having a reputation as a good dancer was a desirable attribute for both boys and girls, and students welcomed opportunities to strut their stuff in dance contests and at dances generally. School publications frequently commented on which students danced well, with yearbooks highlighting the school's best dancers in their lists of superlative seniors. Student newspapers ran gossip and society columns, imitating local society pages and Hollywood fan magazines, and thus students who danced well could imagine themselves as school celebrities.

⁵⁶ "Girls' Club Annual Party a Great Success," *The Cardinal* (South Division), May 26, 1916, 1.

⁵⁷ "The Girls' Club Gives Fine Christmas Party," *The Cardinal* (South Division), December 21, 1917, 1.

⁵⁸ "Girls Date Boys at 'Sadie's' Dance," *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 12, 1940, 3.

⁵⁹ "1986 Questionnaires – Answers from Class of 1936," Archives, Western High School, Baltimore, Maryland.

These columns were a product of students' fixation on status and popularity. Even though these newspapers had a youth audience and this gossip was occupied with youthful activities, students patterned a high school version of celebrity after adult examples and idols.

Students saw dancing as a way to gain acclaim, and they compared their dancing abilities with their classmates' skills. This comparison could take on a competitive quality as a student column at Mission High School included this item teasing one student about how he could improve as a dancer: "Claire Daly thinks Bill Lupescu is a very nice dancer. She still thinks she could show him a few steps, though."⁶⁰ This type of banter about outdoing each other and which student was the better dancer was common. A student at the same school wrote about a dance in 1933, "Each boy will vie with the other to produce the best dance steps. Once more the boys will remember that high school seniors aren't far from refined occupations in the outer world."⁶¹ Aside from wanting to impress their peers, boys were concerned with how their dancing might reflect on them once they graduated from high school; students linked good dancing skills with refinement and class status, two indications of their ambitions for adulthood.

Pressure for one-upmanship was reinforced by the popularity of dance contests at school events. Most prevalent during the 1920s and 1930s, these contests remained in evidence through the 1950s, and school newspapers regularly publicized the winners. One Mission High School article claimed that students felt the prizes were a "main factor in the success of their dance."⁶² These contests motivated students not only to develop skills in dancing, but also to attend the dance and show off throughout the evening. Similarly, at the 1928 Valentine Dance in Wisconsin's Wauwatosa High School, "the big event of the evening was the presentation by Miss McGovern of the heart-shaped box of candy to the couple who danced the best."⁶³ The article went on to describe the lengthy deliberation between two couples before handing the prize to one. This portrayal of the contest as this climactic event speaks to how much students enjoyed these competitions and cared about who won. While the involvement of Miss McGovern shows a teacher judging the dance contest and exerting control over the outcome, her participation signifies faculty approval for student dances. The dance forms featured in the different contests changed with musical trends. Two dances at Mission High School in 1931 featured a prize waltz contest, judged by two female teachers and an alumna, with the prizes at one dance being Mission pennants, which were awarded to the "star tackle of the Mission football team," and his date.⁶⁴ In contrast, the 1950 Cherry Hop at Baltimore City College featured contests for jitterbugging and slow dance. Still, formal dance contests seemed to fall out of favor generally after World War II.

Even without winning one of these contests, students could receive praise from their peers. The newspaper complimented students with dancing ability, and students probably did the same privately. Mission High School's newspaper commended the talents of football squad members at a dance in 1932:

At the recent Low Senior Dance we noticed that the football squad is just as tricky on a dance floor as when upon the gridiron. Our linesmen were well represented by Bud McWilliamsen, Bus McGee, George Cannell, Johnnie Nickel and Gene

⁶⁰ Anne Fetesoff, "Pepper's Prattle," *West Wing* (Mission High School), February 21, 1935, 2.

⁶¹ "High Seniors to Jig in Style at Dance," *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 26, 1933, 1.

⁶² "Students Win Dance Prizes," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 9, 1932, 3.

⁶³ "Jenschel and Millar Win At Dance," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 17, 1928, 1.

⁶⁴ "Low Juniors Dance A Big Success," *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 29, 1931, 2.

McAteer, all of whom made perfect line plunges and rushes down the floor and it must have delighted Coach Elder to see his linesmen in such perfect form.⁶⁵

Perhaps to encourage boys who were shy about dancing, the paper connected athleticism and dancing by describing the football players' dance moves as football moves: "Jimmy Summers dazzled the onlookers with his dazzling triple-reverses, Nick Sanoff went ripping through on off-tackle plays, and Joe Berges was seen pulling tricky end runs to the tune of 'Say It Isn't So.'"⁶⁶ The paper also singled out a player dancing with various blonde girls; clearly, the combination of his dancing and position on the football team contributed to his popularity and his appeal to the opposite sex. Although the art of dancing may be more traditionally a feminine trait as evidenced by the lessons oriented toward boys, it was clearly acceptable and even highly desirable for boys to excel at it.

In another example of how dancing was a prized achievement, one *West Wing* article began by listing the honors accorded Mission students, and concluding grandly, "Now to add to her glorification, a fox trot has been originated and called the 'Missionette.' One evening, in the ballroom of Clark's Studio, a group of dancing students were practicing new steps. When asked what they should call it, the group chorused, in unison, 'Call it the Missionette.'"⁶⁷ By highlighting this new dance, the newspaper drew attention to a group of dancers and expressed pride in their classmates. Clark's, as the article noted, was a consistent advertiser in the school newspaper, and this relationship seemed mutually-beneficial. Furthermore, naming the new steps after their school was a demonstration of their school spirit and the extent to which dancing was integrated into their school life.

The newspapers at high schools in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and San Francisco all had gossip columns which named classmates attending various parties, or who had stood out at club events. These columns were most popular and elaborate in the 1930s and 1940s, and they often teased students about their dating and relationships. Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, an all-boys high school, titled its gossip column "The Stranger Says," which featured items such as: "It was worthwhile to see Al Grochmal struggle with Dorts, or to watch Chuck Van Dirszen waltz with that blue-eyed, take-me-away little baby doll! Oh, Oh, All night long I had to keep pinching myself – to convince myself – like the orchestra, 'That This Is No Dream.'"⁶⁸ With such a teasing tone, students were more able to reveal the role of sexual attraction in the act of dancing and choosing partners. These columns took their cue from gossip pages in adult newspapers and reported on students attending parties and dancing at local establishments outside of school or at people's homes. "The Stranger Says" observed the "number of Poly boys which attend those Seton Dances."⁶⁹ Mission High School had two separate columns: one focused more on teasing students about their dating relationships, and the other, "Social Chatter," was more of a society column that noted which students hosted parties or went out dancing. "Social Chatter" named students who had been dancing at the California Club, St. Francis Hotel, or Sir Francis Drake Hotel. For example, a typical item read, "Wolahan's has become a popular dance place for many Missionites on Friday nights. Among the regular attenders are: Ben Bayal, Irene Devlin, Marie Deurloo, Madeline Fraser, Marion Hart, Dot Nelson, Dot Olson, Frank Parker, and Dick

⁶⁵ Ravone Rogerts, "At Mission," *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 11, 1932, 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "New Dance Named," *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 26, 1933, 2.

⁶⁸ "The Stranger Says," *The Poly Press* (Baltimore Polytechnic Institute), December 12, 1932, 3.

⁶⁹ "The Stranger Says," *The Poly Press* (Baltimore Polytechnic Institute), October 31, 1932, 3.

Pendegraff.”⁷⁰ Similarly, another column observed, “Dancing at the Star of the Sea recently were Yveline Laborde, Elaine Dominguez, and Ray McDevitt.”⁷¹ School newspapers also ran ads for dance venues and supported them in their columns with mentions of girls or boys patronizing those businesses. One ad began: “DANCE Under-the-Stars in the ROSE BOWL at LARKSPUR. Grand Opening, Saturday Night, April 13, Paul Law and His Orchestra. Greyhound Buses Direct to Bowl. Every Saturday Night – 9 p.m. till 1 a.m. LARKSPUR FIRE DEPT. (Since 1901)”⁷² While some student names recurred from issue to issue, many did not. Thus while it can be assumed that these columns mainly reflected the doings of a subset of the student body – the more popular students and friends of editors – the columns did extend to a large number of students. Even if these columns reflected a social hierarchy, they reveal how students accounted for dancing in assigning status to each other.

Attending dances and circulating among dance partners, as Beth Bailey has argued, was a component of popularity in the period between 1920 and World War II.⁷³ In these announcements and in their rhetoric, students glorified dancing as an activity while creating their high school version of celebrity gossip. In listing students dancing at the California Club, Mission High School’s columnist Alma Tedsen noted, “Dancing always seems to be a favorite activity for Mission students and Mission is always well represented on dance floors.”⁷⁴ Despite the cancellation of the gossip column at Mission in 1947 and the phasing out of similar columns at other schools, later articles still singled out individuals at the school’s dances for mention. Even as these student newspapers enshrined a youth culture, youth constructed their culture around ideas borrowed from adult society.

Another path to gaining notice at dances was through performing in student dance bands, which were a common feature at high schools in all three cities. Students formed these orchestras at most high schools in the 1920s, and the bands continued to be popular for several decades as the accompaniment for school dances. In students’ minds, music was key to the success of a dance. One article praising the school’s jazz band at Mission High School said, “The dances show promise of continuing to be real enjoyable affairs, because the most important of item, the music, has been taken care of.”⁷⁵ Student reporters repeatedly praised the dance band’s commitment and practice schedule, with announcements that the dance orchestra practiced once a week and encouraged student auditions.⁷⁶ Dance bands were most frequently all-male, but every now and then a few girls joined. Girls at Mission High School even formed an all-female swing band in 1939, saying, “Those who have listened in at rehearsals have observed a few hot licks and many more swings of the lipstick. We understand the licks emphasize the swing while the lipstick serves to bring out the contrapuntal theme. Or maybe it does that to the looks.”⁷⁷ With music so vital to dancing, student musicians could command admiration from their classmates.

Just as some students gained renown as dancers, others gained local fame as bandleaders. For example, Mission High School sophomore Fred Ferronato led the school’s dance band, The Star Dreamers, in playing for a dance. The school newspaper wrote glowingly, “Fred and the

⁷⁰ “Social Chatter,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 22, 1936, 3.

⁷¹ June Higginbotham, “Social Chatter,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), January 18, 1935, 2.

⁷² Advertisement for Rose Bowl at Larkspur, *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 12, 1946, 3.

⁷³ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 31.

⁷⁴ Alma Tedsen, “Social Chatter,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), August 31, 1934, 2.

⁷⁵ “The Dance Orchestra,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 29, 1924, 1.

⁷⁶ “Dance Orchestra to Be with Us Again This Term,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 4, 1925, 1.

⁷⁷ Untitled, *West Wing* (Mission High School), January 20, 1939, 1.

boys have worked long and faithfully to create a band that is worthy of representing Mission. They are to be highly commended for their school spirit in re-establishing a band that Mission would be proud to call its own.”⁷⁸ While the reporter cited band members’ school spirit, keeping the band within the school setting, the attention given by the school newspaper reflects how these band members stood out from the student body with their performances. Similarly, at West Division High School in Milwaukee, an article about the school’s newly formed swing band declared, “Johnny Shannon, senior, is well known for his antics on the drums, and should make himself more popular in this organization. Some say he rivals Benny Goodman’s ace drummer.”⁷⁹ Students thus felt performing in the band added to one’s popularity and desirability, and musicians could relish comparisons with adult musical idols. In Baltimore, the two all-male high schools frequently hired bands in which one or several students were members or bands with alumni. Supporting their classmates in a band seemed a strong selling point to student newspapers, again recalling school spirit.

On the other hand, students in the dance orchestra also opened themselves up to potential criticism by being responsible for entertaining their classmates. One article from Mission High School in 1924 contained this opinion of their student dance band, “The melody furnished at the dances of the past semester was not always of the best. The jazz orchestra was always a sort of mythical organization and a rather hap-hazard affair. The music at the dances was the last consideration and there was a wild scramble the last minute to find a few musicians.” However, student newspapers were generally positive about the dance bands, and that article went on to praise the new orchestra that would be ready in March, “An eight piece orchestra will be pleasant to listen to, good to look at, and keen to dance to.”⁸⁰ Similarly, an appraisal of a freshman dance congratulated the band, “The dance was a success and probably much of the credit for the success of the dance is due primarily to the efforts of our syncopating serenaders who played such melodious strains of jazz, that the feet of the dancers could not be kept still.”⁸¹ Students found their classmates generally supportive of their efforts.

Still, dance bands had to impress their classmates in order to remain in demand. Mission High School’s newspaper reported that after one dance orchestra played for the first time, “their playing proved such a success that they are to play for all the P.-T.A. dances.”⁸² The dance orchestra not only pleased the students but also gained parental sponsorship, and thus parental approval. Student dance bands sought to increase their bookings and struggled with professionalism as they found themselves in competition with adult bands. At Mission High School in the mid-1940s, students debated whether dance organizers should hire bands with union musicians, and one student band in 1945 featured union members at Mission High School.⁸³ But the student body began to prefer dancing to adult bands. In 1947, the dance committee explicitly stated this preference, “In the past the Dance Committee used mostly the school band and occasionally a union band. But this term they are trying to have all union bands at all the dances to make them more popular.”⁸⁴ The dance committee must have observed or found a student preference for union bands, and thus believed union bands would be a bigger draw, perhaps because they would have different bands as a change of pace. Nevertheless, that

⁷⁸ “H-4’s ‘Jinx Dance’ Held in Gym Tonight,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 16, 1947, 1.

⁷⁹ “Dancers to Strut Lambeth When Band Plays Melodies,” *The Comet* (West Division), October 12, 1938, 4.

⁸⁰ “The Dance Orchestra,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 29, 1924, 1.

⁸¹ “Freshman Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 28, 1927, 2.

⁸² “Murphy Leads Dance Orchestra at Rally,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 3, 1935, 3.

⁸³ “Football Will Be Theme of Dance,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 5, 1945, 1.

⁸⁴ “Dance Committee Elects Officers, Plans Dances,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 7, 1947, 2.

year, the dance committee still selected a school band to try out at dances for seniors and juniors. Mr. Moskowitz, a teacher, held out hope for the dance band and stated that he thought the band would be a success and would play at the last dance of the term.⁸⁵ Even as student preferences leaned toward adult musicians, this fluctuating between a union band and a student band reflects how student musicians really did perform as adults.

Dance bands remained a part of school culture, and in 1963, all of San Francisco high schools brought their dance bands together at the First Annual All-City Dance Band Clinic held in Mission High School's auditorium.⁸⁶ However, dance bands no longer had such a great hold on school dances and diminished in popularity after World War II. Their decline was surely linked to changes in popular music styles and the increased use of recorded music at dances. Students who were in dance bands took on a professional role, playing in place of adult bands at school dances, and thus emulated adult idols.

Students also encountered adults seeking to provide dancing entertainment for youth. Adults welcomed dances as a supervised alternative to whatever else students might do outside of school. Some historians, such as Ellen Rothman, have mainly credited adults for the rise of dances in schools by claiming that 1920s high school officials "instituted dances, in an effort of varying success to take the play away from commercial dance halls and road houses."⁸⁷ While these explanations underplay youth involvement in establishing school dances, a select number of adults did take an active role in promoting sanctioned dancing environments. Just as adults became involved as advisors and as judges in dance contests, so too did high school administrators work with parents and alumni to hold more dances. Mission High School's Parent-Teacher Association threw a dance in 1924 for students, and the president of the association, Mrs. Roeschise, said, "This evening is yours to do with, as you please and we wish to make it a get-together night. We want you to like us as we like you and to learn to understand us as we are learning to understand you. We want you to be glad you came and we hope that if we have another similar affair you will be only too anxious to come."⁸⁸ Such a dance then stressed a relationship between youth and adults, as the student article supported the PTA by saying that the students should appreciate this dance and cooperate with them, "If Missionites will help the association in every possible way, the association will continue to do good things for us. It will put on regular socials similar to the one last Friday evening and it will do many things that will benefit and be of interest to us, for that is their fundamental reason for organizing."⁸⁹ The article urged students to recognize the contributions of the PTA to student welfare, with the promise of dances as an incentive to value that relationship. The evidence of adult investment in dances may have impressed on students that dances, while for their enjoyment, were not just the business of youth.

Adults in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, sponsored Satnite Recreational Dances in the late 1930s and adult community leaders met with ten Wauwatosa students to plan these dances. These dances were not all well-attended, but they show adults according students positions of power and responsibility.⁹⁰ Dances were a way in which adults made a show of taking students

⁸⁵ "Spring Frolic Planned For Night of April 11," *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 28, 1947, 1.

⁸⁶ "Dance Bands in Concert Tonight," *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 22, 1963, 1.

⁸⁷ Ellen Rothman, *Hearts and Hands: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 292.

⁸⁸ "Lots of Pep at P.T.A. Dance," *West Wing* (Mission High School), June 18, 1924, 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "Dim Lighting Door Prizes, Soft Drinks, Will Improve Satnite Dance 'Atmosphere,'" *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), January 19, 1939, 1.

seriously. In the 1940s, the San Francisco PTA began organizing evening all-High School dances, with the first held at Galileo High School from 8pm to 11:30 pm. Tickets were sold in the different schools around the city, and then students came together at Galileo for the dance. The Mission student newspaper promoted the dance with the promise of more dances saying, "If the affair is a success, another one will be held shortly either at Balboa [High School] or here."⁹¹ This series of dances was continued in the next year with a dance held off school grounds in Aquatic Park. Leading the charge for these dances was Mrs. Vernon Skewes-Cox, a "civic leader interested in the welfare and entertainment of high school students, with the San Francisco Recreation committee and the faculty of various high schools." The student newspaper approved of the adults sponsoring these dances for meeting "the dancing needs of young people."⁹² While not every student necessarily endorsed these dances, their occurrence is evidence of adults' catering to the popularity of dancing among youth.

Some adult organizations, such as the YMCA, had teen affiliates who were among the most frequent dance holders in high schools. These groups sold dance tickets at school and were featured in the school yearbook, but mostly held their events off campus. The Hi-Y of Baltimore City College held an annual dance that was written up in the school newspaper each year. Rather than holding the dance at school, in 1951 they held it at Levering Hall, which is on Johns Hopkins' campus, suggesting again an aspiration toward college.⁹³ Similarly the Tri-Y, which was a girls rifle club at Mission High School affiliated with the YMCA, sponsored a dance at the Finnish Hall in 1943. Admission was 25 cents and the dance went from eight to eleven in the evening. The 26 girl members of the club were preparing packages for wounded servicemen and rolled bandages for the Red Cross, and also planned a show to be given at the different hospitals.⁹⁴ Through offering these youth activities and chances to dance, these adult organizations were cultivating youth as future members.

Students would not have seen dancing as merely a youth affair when adults danced too and were so invested in having students dance. Dances such as homecoming brought alumni back to school, as already mentioned. It was also common at Mission High School for alumni to host the first dance of the school year. The student newspaper reported, "Students coming away from Mission High School on a Friday evening recently must have felt what a ghastly gap there would be in our social school life if there were no dances. The Alumni gave us the first dance of the term, which proved to be a great success, owing to the splendid response of the student body."⁹⁵ While the crowd was mostly students, alumni were in attendance and the school newspaper occasionally reported sightings of recent alumni at school dances during the year. Dances were a significant way for high school students to interact with alumni and further associate dancing with adult behavior.

Through offering opportunities to dance, adults expanded their ability to supervise youth in the process of growing up. PTAs and community leaders organized dance series for high school students, who perhaps might see these dances as models of civic engagement. Dances such as homecoming included alumni and adults in the festivities and contributed to students viewing dancing as a lifelong activity. The involvement of adults in these dances supported a student view that dancing was valued in the wider world outside of high school.

⁹¹ "Attention: Strut Your Stuff At Galileo Dance Tonight," *West Wing* (Mission High School), October 18, 1940, 1.

⁹² "All-City Dances Urged to Continue," *West Wing* (Mission High School), September 26, 1941, 1.

⁹³ "Hi-Y Presents Annual Snowball Hop," *The Collegian* (Baltimore City College), January 19, 1951, 1.

⁹⁴ "Tri-Y Girls Sponsor Dance," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 3, 1943, 4.

⁹⁵ "Alumni Dance Fine Affair," *West Wing* (Mission High School), March 4, 1925, 1.

When asked in 1946 to describe “How I’d Run Stuff and Things” for a poll at San Francisco’s Mission High School, student Luella Meaner responded, “I’d have dances every day and invite St. Ignatius and Sacred Heart boys over to dance.”⁹⁶ This enthusiasm for dancing does not seem markedly different from students’ attitudes prior to World War II, yet there was a shift toward reclassifying dancing as the realm of youth rather than adults. A few years later, Mission’s school newspaper reprinted a *Ladies Home Journal* survey, which attested to the popularity of dancing among youth and gave an overview of teen dancing customs across the nation in 1949. The article went on to chronicle the different dance steps that were popular in different areas of the country – the Charleston in Philadelphia, the Polka in Maine, and the Mexican Shuffle in the Southwest – while Mission editors added that their school’s students also liked the Charleston and Mexican Shuffle. In this way, students still expressed an interest in keeping up with national dancing trends as well as identifying themselves with those trends. They may also have drawn inspiration from examples, such as these:

Schools or clubs in the Midwest rent old movie shorts of dance bands, screen them in the gym and dance to the music in the dim light given off by the movie screen. North Carolina teeners check their shoes at the door and hold ‘barefoot dances’ on floors specially finished to eliminate splinter casualties. This ‘sock hop shoeless dancing was originated to preserve the finish on gym floors but now is popular at all times. In San Francisco, couples drive to a parking area overlooking the Golden Gate bridge, [arrange] their cars in a huge circle, turn car radios to the same station and dance in the beam of the headlights.⁹⁷

Articles like these in adult magazines characterized dancing as increasingly an activity for youth and tied dancing to schools. The *Ladies Home Journal* survey acknowledged how school organized the lives of youth by noting the great number of dances held on Friday nights, because “no school tomorrow means big dance tonight.”

Yet even as dancing was identified as a youth activity in the post-World War II period, students during the 1910s through 1940s saw dancing as an opportunity to emulate adults. Their high school dances reflect how, even as students were participating and building their own youth culture, they were occupied with growing up. Dancing’s appeal was not just in how it allowed youth to emulate adult behavior, but also in how it represented their aspirations toward sophistication. In their discussions of dances in gossip columns and cultivating social graces, students conflated elegance with maturity, upper-class behaviors with adulthood. They may have fantasized about a more glamorous life or, especially in the Great Depression, a more prosperous life. Concerns about social grace and refinement appear related to students’ awareness that high school educations could offer social mobility, and students wanted to be prepared to enter a higher class of society.

Thus students embedded college customs, such as the prom, into high school life. To them, collegiate culture represented the world of adults; they prized both the greater independence and the privilege of these older students. Students took on responsibilities regarding dance finances, positions of authority in teaching dance steps to classmates so they were prepared for prom, and star status by performing band music and imitating their idols. Skill

⁹⁶ “How I’d Run Stuff and Things,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 21, 1946, 2.

⁹⁷ “Boy – ‘I’m Asking!’ Girl – ‘I’m Dancing!’” *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 15, 1949, 2.

on the dance floor translated positively to one's popularity and one's desirability as a date, and students practiced with an eye to future courtship. Through their ideas about dancing, students revealed a conceptualization of adulthood that stressed sophistication, attractiveness to the opposite sex, managerial responsibility, and autonomy. The prom took hold as a rite of passage in high schools during a period when its customs encapsulated many of the traits youth looked forward to in adulthood. Its formality, its emphasis on student couples, the elaborateness of its planning, and its expression of student initiative all lent themselves to establishing prom's unique place in the hearts of high school youth.

Chapter 3

The Cost of Prom

“The Prom Queen, in a lovely creation of pink and pale cream, with a beautiful corsage, makes a picture not soon to be forgotten,” said a 1929 student article from Wauwatosa High School, located outside of Milwaukee.¹ Student writers made many mentions of these formal gowns and corsages as significant parts of their prom memories. The prom’s level of formality was key in setting it off from other school events as the pinnacle of their high school social lives. This formality contributed to the prom’s air of adulthood. As discussed in the previous chapter, students conflated sophistication with maturity in their statements on dancing from the first half of the twentieth century. They hoped prom, in particular, would prepare them for formal events later in life. This experience of donning formalwear and dancing in hotels off-campus made the transition from youth to adult visible. Yet formality came with a price, and while students rarely put up a real fight, they frequently complained through their school newspapers that proms were too expensive.

Complaints about costs were largely limited to prom. Other school events did not provoke the publication of complaints, presumably because they were less expensive, but also because students did not feel that attending those other events was as vital. As a rite of passage, the prom was expected to guide an entire cohort of students in the transition to adulthood, yet its level of formality compromised its accessibility. While the prom did bring students together for a memorable evening, the desire to hold prom as a formal event meant that not all students were able to attend. The cost proved prohibitive for some students, and the expense of formalwear was often a source of tension between students who could afford the appropriate clothing with greater ease and were dedicated to prom as a formal event and those for whom it was a struggle. Although student newspapers rarely recorded the voices of students who did not participate in the prom, they did publish articles demonstrating how the cost of formality divided students during an occasion designed to promote their class spirit and unity. While some believed the importance of prom warranted this expenditure, others refused to participate or could not afford to.

This tension between the desire for formality as a symbol of maturity and the goal of providing a class-wide event found its clearest expression during the Great Depression, when the national economic crisis led students and teachers to question the necessity of formality to the prom. Vocal defenders of wearing formal clothing at the prom argued that much of the event’s significance lay in its formality. In this period, students tried to promote class unity by holding meetings to reach consensus on prom attire, but these meetings often revealed divisions in the student body instead. The desire to vote on rules was an expression of the importance of class unity and democracy, yet some students continued to flout these agreements. The commitment to a more formal prom, and the hope and ambition it represented for students’ futures remained vivid for some students while others sought less formality. Formality continued to be an entrenched characteristic of the prom because it spoke to students’ social aspirations and ideas of adulthood. Students after World War II continued to complain about the costs of prom, but they

¹ “Junior Prom Proves Most Delightful,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa High School), May 7, 1929, 1.

no longer issued challenges to the prom's level of formality. Instead, they spoke of planning and saving in order to attain it.

The issue of cost in attending the prom brought into sharper relief the class divisions among students in high schools. In the very early twentieth century, high school students came only from families who could afford to give up the additional income a youth might contribute to the household. Early twentieth-century public high school students therefore tended to be from middle-class families, who were more able to afford providing their offspring with a protected adolescence. Even by the turn of the century, however the nature of the work that had employed youth was already changing, as noted by scholar Stephen Lassonde. More of them were freed to attend school.² But while many working-class youth entered high school, few graduated since many left to pursue work opportunities. In the 1949 study *Elmtown's Youth*, sociologist August Hollingshead reports that although most children above the age of fourteen entered high school only about one-third of students who entered high school graduated because many of them left to work as they grew older, and educators did not expect students of lower classes to attend high school.³ During the 1920s, the student newspaper at Mission High School in San Francisco printed editorials calling upon students to consider staying in school to graduate in order to enjoy greater earning potential.⁴

Meanwhile, students in high school sought to socialize with their peers. As much as students clamored for dances to be added to the school calendar, they particularly sought to have formal dances. Hollingshead credits this development to female students. "The 'tradition of lovely formals' which had prevailed at 'grand balls' among 'the aristocracy' for a century... was carried into the high school in the early twenties by the dominant girls who started high school dances." These girls who came from relatively higher social classes would have had the most exposure to formal dances, and sought to incorporate them into their school experience. While regular dances required some discretionary income, the prom as a formal dance placed a greater strain on students' finances. Hollingshead wrote of tensions over the costs of formal dances as lower class students after World War I resisted the planning of a formal dance in the school's gym. According to Hollingshead, the formal dance would "place an undue emphasis on clothes and grooming. It is charged that those who can afford expensive clothes, a car, and a good time after the dance talk in front of those who cannot and make them uncomfortable."⁵ This tendency toward emphasizing spending as key to participation in high school life was widespread. Robert and Helen Lynd described in *Middletown* how high schools acted as an insular social world, organized by "the social sifting devices of their elders – money, clothes, personal attractiveness, male physical prowess, exclusive clubs, election to positions of leadership – [which] are all for the first time set going with a population as yet largely undifferentiated save as regards their business class and working class parents."⁶ Students' families and their access to money were significant factors in students' ability to participate and excel in school social life.

Students were thus quite aware of class differences in their peer groups. High school youths' discretionary income sometimes came from parents and sometimes from part-time jobs. According to one historian of high schools, Robert Hampel, 1930s student popularity depended

² Stephen Lassonde, *Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven's Working Class, 1870-1940* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).

³ August Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth and Elmtown Revisited* (New York: Wiley, 1975), 121 and 124-5.

⁴ One example is "High School – What Does It mean to Us," *West Wing* (Mission High School), 29 October 1924, 2.

⁵ Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth*, 197.

⁶ Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929), 211.

greatly on students' parents' social standing, although he argues that this basis for popularity changed two decades later to rely more on individual looks and athleticism since nearly all families were more prosperous after World War II.⁷ The prom represented an opportunity to reach towards a more rarefied stratum of society, but its costs laid bare divisions between students who were able or unable to afford participating in this event.

Students' notion of the prom as a rite of passage reinforced their commitment to its formality. A formal prom symbolized their hopes that their high school educations would assist their social mobility in adulthood. Even though a higher level of formality would limit access to the prom for the entire cohort, particularly during the Great Depression, some students insisted upon retaining formal aspects of the prom. While the prom today remains an event centered on student cohorts, these divisions hint at the postwar decline of students' devotion to class spirit, which came to be less frequently championed in school publications.

Students were well aware that formality came at a price, but they were intent on distinguishing prom from other ordinary school dances. Contributing to the greater cost of prom was students' desire to hold their proms off school grounds during the 1920s. In cities such as Baltimore and San Francisco, they favored fancy hotels in downtown areas where students could feel they were partaking of adult life. Chaperones remained on hand, but the rarefied environment symbolized students' future independence and social mobility.

Rather than having their proms in the school gymnasium, which hosted other school dances, students from San Francisco and Baltimore sought out more elaborate settings and marquee entertainment. This tendency began soon after the prom's introduction to high schools. At Mission High School in San Francisco, students had a full calendar of dances throughout the year; the student government held at least three dances each semester with the different classes usually holding one each as well. All of these dances took place in one of the two gymnasiums in the school building. Beginning in the 1920s, Mission High School and other schools in San Francisco usually held their graduation dances, or senior proms, in local hotel ballrooms. The 1922 class of Mission High School held their dance in the ballroom of the local Whitcomb Hotel, while the classes of 1925 and 1926 opted for ballrooms in the St. Francis Hotel.⁸ This dance was the only one held outside of the school building and the only one that combined dinner with the event. Students looked forward to indulging in a fancy affair by attending their prom in more lavish settings than the usual dances. Baltimore's all-male high schools similarly held their proms in local hotels, such as the Belvedere and the Emerson.

Holding the event off-campus symbolically reflected students' venturing into the world of adults. The elegance of these hotels encouraged students' class aspirations by acquainting them with finer surroundings. Students still shared the experience with their classmates, but by dancing in a space usually occupied by adults, they could feel more grown up. And they were willing to pay more in order to rent a space where they could socialize with each other beyond the classroom walls. These rentals made prom tickets more expensive than those for other events; the prom, by providing this formal experience, was literally worth more.

Even schools that had a tradition of holding their class events on school property desired to hold prom in a special environment. The Milwaukee school board prevented students from

⁷ Robert L. Hampel, *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools Since 1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 82.

⁸ "Senior Plans Under Way for Graduation," *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 11, 1925, 1; "Program of Graduation," *West Wing* (Mission High School), January 14, 1926, 2.

holding proms in hotels with its rule against students holding school social events off school grounds.⁹ Still, the notes from a meeting of the class of 1917 at West Division High School in Milwaukee read, “We selected class rings and discussed a Junior Prom, but at length decided that as the gym was too small for the purpose we would not give a dance that year. But during our Senior year we held the Senior Informal, and all who attended it were agreed that it was one of the most enjoyable affairs ever given in the gym.”¹⁰ Size may not have been the only matter, even though the senior class was undoubtedly smaller than the junior because some students would not have continued on to senior year. Rather, the varying suitability of the gymnasium also speaks to how students viewed the purpose of a junior prom; while the gym may have been appropriate for a Senior informal, it was not ideal for a junior prom. Even though Milwaukee students’ proms took place at school, many of those students sought out other venues once the prom had ended. Chicago was a popular prom night destination where students could continue celebrating with friends but also experience entertainment in an adult setting, and at a distance from their parents and teachers.

To students, the environment of the prom joined with formalwear and corsages to create an adult atmosphere. Hotel ballrooms reflected the grandeur of their hopes for life after high school. As San Francisco and Baltimore students established a tradition of holding their proms in hotels, they set prom apart from other school events which occurred on campus. Even Milwaukee students who held their proms at school yearned to break free from the confinement of the gymnasium. The attachment of proms to these off-campus venues during the 1920s expressed students’ eagerness for independence and social mobility.

The Great Depression during the following decade challenged students’ ability to hold a traditional and formal prom that expressed those desires. Creating that experience placed financial strains on youth during the 1930s, and students sought to devise new schemes to widen classmates’ abilities to participate in proms. Still others attempted to continue to enshrine the prom as a formal event. Repeatedly, cohorts experienced a tension between their willingness to consider issues as a group, but also their determination to hold on to a particular vision of how prom should be. Students’ varying responses to the question of prom’s formality were not only a reflection of their financial comfort, but also their priorities for this event. Regardless of their disagreements, they valued participating in decisions about how prom should weather the decade. While the Depression dimmed the likelihood that students would experience the bright prospects that prom formality represented, some students still felt their proms should reflect the adulthood they desired.

In the years leading into the Depression, students had demonstrated an awareness of costs and engaged in group negotiations about the costs. In Wauwatosa, a suburb of Milwaukee, the high school’s 1927 junior prom committee bought corsages for everyone. The practice of having a uniform corsage was to prevent girls from feeling competitive about the quality of their corsages. Similarly, the committee declared that students would not wear tuxedos, so boys who did not own them would not feel left out, and seniors and alumni were admitted for free.¹¹ All these steps were said to be taken for the purpose of economy, and rentals were not yet discussed. A year later in 1928, the prom committee went farther in making class activities more economical for students. They separated the prom from the class banquet, but these changes

⁹ “Principal Shong has informed...” *The Comet* (West Division High School newspaper), March 14, 1934, 4.

¹⁰ “History of the Class of ’17,” *The Comet* (West Division yearbook) (1917), 61.

¹¹ “Proms Too Inconsistent Is Student’s Opinion,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 28, 1928, 2.

caused some controversy. Promgoers still paid the same amount, but students who only wanted to attend the banquet did not have to pay for both. The committee was proud of its decision, issuing a statement: "One principle which seems fundamental is: Those who attend the prom should be the ones to pay for it, and no others should be asked to contribute to its expense."¹² In these ways, student organizers made efforts to redesign prom with an eye to the expenses undertaken by their classmates. These efforts seemed to provide a show of unity among the junior class as the prom committee considered the needs of their classmates and students adopted a standard corsage.

However, some Wauwatosa students resisted these changes. An editorial titled, "Proms Too Inconsistent," complained about how the 1928 prom did not mirror the previous year's: "I suggest that the proms be consistent, either all wear tuxs [sic] and wear them every year, have job-lot corsages every year, or let them be bought by the individual, have a banquet every year, or none at all, and above all the seniors and alumni be admitted free."¹³ This editorial's author claimed to not oppose cost-cutting measures, but did not seem to favor them either. What this piece insisted upon was the importance of establishing prom traditions, which outweighed the benefits of varied tactics to save students money. This editor valued the consistency represented by tradition and ritual. This call for consistency did not bear fruit, as the prom committee went back to buying corsages in lots the next year, "so that the girls won't need to be afraid one bouquet will be larger than the next."¹⁴ However, this tension between students' desire for annual traditions and students' class spirit, as well as their fluctuating needs for economy, repeatedly arose in student newspapers during the Great Depression.

While college proms rebounded quickly in the Depression, high school newspapers revealed greater division among students as to whether the prom ought to remain such a costly event. This ambivalence reflected a high school population that was becoming more economically diverse in this period as enrollments increased, while college students remained more privileged in background. Most high schools, while lacking the budgets of college social committees, still sought to hold their proms with as much pomp as their budgets would allow.

The tradition of prom being held off campus retained its hold on some students' imaginations even during the Depression. In 1933, for example, Baltimore City College held its prom in the main ballroom of Lord Baltimore Hotel.¹⁵ The Depression had a greater impact on proms at San Francisco's Mission High School, which held the event in its gymnasium in 1936 and 1938 and set the admission at \$1.00 per couple. These proms were still more elaborate than the usual dances, but exhibited more restraint than earlier proms as they did not charge significantly more than the admission for other dances which were usually between 25 cents and 50 cents.¹⁶ Hosting the prom at the school was less expensive and reflected the restrictions on many high school students' budgets during this period.

Just as newspapers recorded little conflict over organizers' venue choices, there were few complaints about continued restrictions on corsages. Whereas students before had discussed whether to buy girls all the same corsage, now they were encouraged by teachers to ban corsages altogether. In 1934, at Wauwatosa High School, the prom advisor Mr. Swancutt "asked that girls

¹² "New Prom Policy Is better for Non-Dancers" *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 28, 1928, 1.

¹³ "Proms Too Inconsistent Is Student's Opinion," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 28, 1928, 2.

¹⁴ "Prom Plans Under Way," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 19, 1929, 1.

¹⁵ "Annual Senior Prom To Take Place June 1; 'Townsmen' Will Play," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), April 21, 1933, 1.

¹⁶ "P.T.A. dance to be Held Tonight in Boys' Gym." *West Wing* (Mission High School), December 7, 1928, 1.

agree not to carry corsages.”¹⁷ No editorials inveighed against the ban. Swancutt’s discouragement of corsages illustrates the involvement of adults in urging moderation in proms during the Depression. This frowning on corsages continued at high schools in the Milwaukee area through the rest of the 1930s and into the 1940s. A survey of nine schools in Milwaukee in 1946 by South Division students, noted, “Corsages are permissible at most of the schools holding proms, but many try to discourage the idea altogether.”¹⁸ Despite the general acceptance of the ban on corsages, evidently some students refused to bend to popular will. “The wearing of corsages by a few at each Prom has always been a source of embarrassment,” said another prom advisor in 1939.¹⁹ Students who broke with their peers by indulging in corsages clearly felt that the flowers remained significant to their prom experience and desired to stand out from the crowd. Yet they were in the minority, and students largely accepted this concession to the financial difficulties of the times.

What engaged students in the most vigorous debates was the question of how they should dress for prom. Through meeting as a class to determine the prom’s level of formality, students demonstrated a desire for cohesion, but students disagreed among themselves about the priorities for prom. Some valued access, others valued formality and tradition which were aligned with their idealized form of adulthood. The small number of students who broke with the agreed restrictions sought to stand out as individuals and assert their vision of what prom represented. Students remained invested in the prom as a ritual, but they held different views of what prom stood for. Adults also sought to impose their ideas of the formality appropriate during a Depression, but students’ newspapers showed that student opinion mattered in determining the outcomes.

Students held class-wide forums to determine the level of formality in their prom clothing during the Depression. In 1931, at Mission High School in San Francisco, seniors met in the auditorium to discuss whether boys should wear tuxedos at the prom. While class president Joe Curtin modeled a tuxedo to show support for how fine formalwear would look, the student newspaper gently mocked him for “his vanity.” Indeed the school’s principal and other officials made it known that they did not favor students wearing tuxedos because they were expensive. Whereas students in Wisconsin had discussed the expense of purchasing a tuxedo, students in San Francisco had the option of renting one by this time. According to the article, “It is their opinion that the money paid in the rental of a tuxedo would be almost sufficient to make a down payment on a suit of clothes.”²⁰ In comparing the cost of a one-time rental to an investment in a suit, teachers also connected prom attire to students’ futures and considered that owning a suit might be worthwhile for students.

The students discussed the issue for an hour and took a vote about wearing tuxedos with “an overwhelming majority for the negative.” The article acknowledged that “the dreams of a certain few of the high-seniors, who had looked forward with anticipation to graduation night, when [they] would promenade on the stage dressed in tuxedos were shattered.” By including tuxedos as a meaningful part of their anticipation for graduation, students linked formality with the prom tradition. The article poked fun at those who wished to wear tuxedos but retained a

¹⁷ “James Nichols and Jackie Peterson to Lead the 1934 Junior Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 20, 1934, 1.

¹⁸ “Nine High Schools in City Support Traditional Proms,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), February 8, 1946, 4.

¹⁹ “Prom 75 Hours Away; Queen, King to Wear White,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 11, 1939, 3.

²⁰ Thomas Feeney, “Senior Boys Will Not Wear Tuxedos – Usual Style of Dress For Wear at ‘Grad,’” *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 24, 1931, 1.

touch of sympathy for that desire. Students then discussed appropriate alternative outfits, with one student suggesting “dark coats and white flannel pants.”²¹ Students’ suggestions for tuxedo-alternatives were still nicer than everyday clothes, so even though students turned away from strict formality, they wanted to maintain some standard for prom attire. These types of discussions took place in a number of high schools as students considered how to scale back their grandiose visions of prom to fit with Depression-era limitations. That Mission students took an hour to debate the wearing of tuxedos speaks to how important these issues were to them. While they agreed to the suggestions of the adult authorities at their school, it is significant that they voted and heard each other’s arguments as well. While some students, such as the class president, preferred to wear the traditional tuxedo, the majority of students decided not to ask their classmates to rent tuxedos.

These debates were not merely about what to wear, but also about what the prom represented to students. Because students conflated adulthood with social mobility, prom derived its adult atmosphere and ritual status in part from its formality. Adult teachers tried to urge students towards moderation, but some students felt that moderation would remove an intrinsic component of the prom. At Wauwatosa High School in 1933, adults issued a plan to cancel the prom in favor of holding a less formal dance. “Because of the prevalent ‘thing’ known as the depression, the members of the school board thought it best that the formal prom should be abandoned. It was desired to have something more economical and therefore informal.”²² The school board talked with teachers and reached an agreement to hold a spring dance with a few special features and admission set at one dollar. Even these adults recognized that prom was partly defined by formality as they titled its replacement a “spring dance” instead.

However, students responded to the plan with a “mighty storm” of debate. At the student assembly, one girl Jeanne Rasey elicited “much applause and many groans” for her contention that a formal dance would require no more expense than an informal dance, because “the wearing apparel required for a formal dance was no more expensive than that which is worn to an informal dance.” She also argued that alumni would be more likely to come support a formal dance. The varied reactions to Rasey’s speech show a divided student body despite students coming together to talk about the school board’s ruling. The paper compared another girl, Winnie Loomis, to Patrick Henry for her statement that “prom was a privilege of the junior class, and should not be taken away. She also mentioned that every other junior class had had a prom and therefore they were entitled to the privilege also.” Loomis demanded a student vote, and the teacher serving as prom advisor “reminded the assembly that the decision of authority must be taken as granted and that the vote would be submitted merely to represent the opinion of the class and would not determine the decision.” The newspaper then emphasized that “the vote rendered was of great assistance in determining the decision of authority, however, because many juniors are seen scurrying around on this or that errand.”²³

For students, the informal spring dance proposed by adult administrators was no substitute for their junior prom. In anticipating their prom, a majority of students looked forward to a formal event even in the midst of the Depression. Loomis spoke of such a prom as an entitlement of the junior class; it had status as a rite of passage. Her vehemence highlights how entrenched a formal prom had become in this student culture that tied refinement to adulthood. Students’ persistence in voting, despite discouragement from their teacher, highlights their

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Juniors Battle In Class Meeting to Assure Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa High School), April 21, 1933, 1.

²³ Ibid.

dedication to the formal aspects of prom and to exercising their voices. The article also reflects students' feelings of vindication when school authorities agreed to hold the prom. However, as much as the newspaper favored the arguments made by the advocates of a formal prom, the reporter also revealed that despite a majority, there were many who groaned at Jeanne Rasey's implausible claim that a formal dance was not more expensive than an informal one. Therefore, while students who supported a formal prom outnumbered their opponents, the student class was divided about the necessity of formality to mark their junior year. Formality withstood the challenge of the Depression, but did not register unanimous approval by students who may have felt that the splendors of adulthood that formality represented were less attainable in these hard times.

It is notable that the two speakers highlighted by the school newspaper were female, because another method of handling the difficulty of wearing formal clothing during the Depression was to require more formal dress for girls and allow boys to wear semiformal clothing. There had been some precedent for this division in the way students already dressed for dances. In 1916 at Milwaukee's West Side High School, the school newspaper commented, "By the way, the difference between a formal and an informal dance is that at the formal we decorate our girls and our gym a bit more. The boys do not lend themselves to decoration so easily, and usually look about the same."²⁴ The Lynds observed in *Middletown* that the pressure for girls to have a special evening dress was higher than it was for boys to appear in tuxedos.²⁵ Throughout the Depression, students at different schools explicitly demarcated levels of dress for boys and girls. For Wauwatosa High School's 1930 junior prom, "Formal dress was decided upon for the girls, and flannels and dark coats for the boys."²⁶ This split between the levels of apparel for girls and boys supports the Lynds' observation that wearing formal gowns was more important for girls than wearing tuxedos was for boys. The comparison in the sentence also implies that students felt that flannels did not belong in the same category as tuxedos, though flannels were still more formal than everyday wear.

At Baltimore City College, an all-male high school, the prom chairman Robert Rafnel left both options open for men in 1932, "Escorts must be dressed in either tuxedos or blue coats and white flannel pants. Only ladies in evening dress will be admitted."²⁷ William Rogers, Baltimore City College's prom chairman in 1933, claimed that both tuxedos and flannels were "formal for summer wear," but he also acknowledged the decision to allow a coat and flannels was to maximize the prom's accessibility to students. Rogers commented, "It seems advisable and democratic for us to leave the matter of dress to those who must wear the clothes. So divided is opinion among seniors that a decision favoring either tuxedo or blue coat and white flannels is bound to disappoint one or another."²⁸ Rather than divide the boys along wardrobe lines, students in the Depression specifically created greater flexibility for boys' apparel. Students made these decisions about dress codes to provide greater access to the prom but still maintained a standard that called for nicer apparel than what students wore to other dances.

Dance committees discussed making formal dress optional for girls as well, but this proposition was more controversial. A Wauwatosa High School editorial from 1939 complained

²⁴ "Social Events," *The Comet* (West Division yearbook) (1916), 115.

²⁵ Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown*, 164.

²⁶ "Newton Held Prom King, Annual Junior Prom May 10," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 25, 1930, 1.

²⁷ "Senior Prom To Be Given June 8 at Lord Baltimore," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), May 20, 1932, 4.

²⁸ "Senior Prom Clothes To Be Optional, Says Committee Chairman," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), May 5, 1933, 1.

about how the school's dances varied between formal and informal. In arguing for a clear dress code announced beforehand, the editorial discussed how unhelpful the declaration of optional formal dress was for girls: "Each girl still wants to appear at the dance just as she knows the rest of the girls will appear. She doesn't want to be 'different'. If most of the girls are going to wear formals, and she can't afford one, well, it's just too bad. Would, then, the only fair solution of the problem be to make all four school dances informal? We don't know."²⁹ While boys had the option of choosing between two standard outfits, girls' clothing had more subtle distinctions. Female students feared wearing something inappropriate, something that might reveal her exclusion from the crowd consensus. While showing sympathy for girls' desire to conform to the popular will, the author seemed less willing to relinquish formality. Giving up formality would have meant giving up a chance to try on adulthood. The piece mocked how the divided dance committee often involved their friends and the rest of the school in the debate over formality. Students were thus engaged in a wide conversation about what formal dress meant for students' desire and ability to participate in events such as the prom.

Yet even as girls desired to conform to the chosen level of formality, they still engaged in efforts at enhancing their individual appearance. In fact, taking pride in their appearance was a key part of the prom experience. Even with the Depression, a Wauwatosa High School article described how, "Girls Endure Torture For Prom." "Perhaps [guardian angels] were puzzled as to why sweet young things were tweezing their eyebrows and sitting for hours in beauty parlors undergoing all sorts of tortures to transform heavy straight hair into light fluffy coiffures, or to rid their skin of the slightest blemish."³⁰ The article continued to rhapsodize over individual girls' outfits. While efforts such as tweezing eyebrows did not require an outlay of funds, the time spent in beauty parlors spoke to how girls who could afford to use commercial services did so. Another article from 1938 was subtitled, "Ask Your Girl to Prom Now So She Has Time To Glamorize for You."³¹ Even as girls shared this ritual of preparation, they sought individual recognition and transformation. These makeovers represented trading in their youthful selves for their more glamorous, adult selves. Girls navigated between referencing their peers in their mode of dress and comparing themselves with fashionable magazine images.

Debates about formality continued into 1940 when the Wauwatosa student council confronted two conflicting proposals. One would have made two of the four school dances completely informal while leaving the two other dances optionally formal, but the other proposal in the council pushed to have all school dances declared informal. The council decided to have homeroom representatives gauge the response from the rest of the school since those favoring informality claimed that "the majority of the student population would favor making the four dances informal." Mr. Swancutt, the class advisor, made his position known, as he repeated that "the school could not definitely declare a dance formal and refuse admission on an informal basis."³² Swancutt's statement reveals his judgment that some students who did not have the means to arrive in more formal dress kept away from dances. The decision to bring the debate over formality to the wider student population suggests both the desire for class agreement and also the division within the student body on this issue. Moreover, even though the school could

²⁹ "Formal or Informal," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 8, 1939, 6.

³⁰ "Girls Endure Torture For Prom," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 17, 1932, 1.

³¹ "June Prom Digs Up Question of What To Do When Dating and Being Dated," *The Comet* (West Division newspaper), May 18, 1938, 1.

³² "Warren Elected Prom King," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 6, 1940, 1.

not turn away students dressed informally, students would have felt peer pressure to attend only if they were dressed appropriately, in other words, like their better-off peers.

The council then issued this guide to the dress code for the year's dances: "1. The Homecoming dance shall be completely informal. 2. The Christmas dance shall be informal for boys and optionally formal for girls. 3. The Valentine dance shall be completely informal. 4. The Junior Prom shall be optionally formal for both boys and girls."³³ While the principal had to approve this decision, it was still students who joined together over their divided opinions about the necessity for formality. Students continued to give boys greater leeway in dressing informally at the Christmas dance. In 1941, the school's newspaper echoed this tendency when it issued the following dress guidelines for that year's prom: "At almost every prom some controversy has arisen as to the correct attire for the dance. As released to the *Cardinal News* by the legislating prom committee, the girls are requested to dress formal, with their escorts [sic] having the choice of formal or informal wear."³⁴ While formal dress for girls was merely a request, the guidelines failed to mention the informal option; boys were given a clearer choice. Girls at Wauwatosa certainly had expressed a desire for formality. These guidelines then served both as a reflection of a majority of students acquiescing to their preferences, and a dismissal of the financial concerns of other classmates.

In 1940, a Wauwatosa student editorial had reacted to the announcement that nearby Shorewood High School had replaced its formal prom with "informal, de-glamorized spring dance" by exhorting classmates not to let "Tosa's Prom ... sink in its rank as a school event as Shorewood's Prom has."³⁵ For this author, formality was a defining feature of the prom. Without it, the prom would no longer be as important. During the Depression, students gathered to meet and discuss the type of prom they would support. Some claimed formality as a tradition of prom; even if somewhat diminished during the Depression, tuxedos and gowns symbolized the prom's role as a taste of adulthood. Students were determined that they would be the ones to redefine the prom during this decade, despite adult administrators' attempts to impose moderation, and students made compromises to separate levels of formal dress for boys and girls. While the Depression hindered students' displays of maturity through formalwear and corsages, students also tied autonomy to adulthood. Prom endured the Depression with its formality lessened but still in place; many students continued to believe that nicer apparel should befit a rite of passage.

The trends begun during the Depression continued through World War II. But the war also anticipated some trends of the postwar era. During the war, proms rebounded somewhat from their Depression financial restrictions. Mission High School continued to hold its prom in the school gymnasium in 1940 and 1941, but began returning to hotel ballrooms for its later wartime proms. The senior class of the fall of 1943 held its prom in San Francisco's Palace Hotel. For this class, students paid \$7 per couple, and men bought corsages for \$5 and rented tuxedos for \$2.50.³⁶ Thus not only had the setting returned to pre-Depression opulence, but the importance of tuxedos and corsages returned.

While students were interested in treating themselves to a more elaborate prom, they were still not immune to its costs. The student yearbook for Mission High School commented in 1944, "The nearness of graduation is indicated by two things ... strains of the graduation march

³³ "Council Acts – To Seat Lunchers, Make Dances Definite," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 29, 1940, 3.

³⁴ "Girls Requested To Dress Formal," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 25, 1941, 1.

³⁵ "Shorewood's Prom and Ours," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1940, 2.

³⁶ *The Mission* (Mission High School yearbook) (1944), 19.

and the strain on Joe Mission's wallet."³⁷ Though students complained about the costs of their senior prom, the yearbook also declared the attitude to be one of "What price glory?" Students were more willing to pay the expenses required for a formal prom. Similarly, the senior prom for the fall class of 1943 was arranged by Jean Moen, the class vice-president, whose appeals for money were seen as never-ending, though hard to resist: "One look at that Moen smile, and who could say no?"³⁸ Even as students continued to grumble about the cost of prom, they seemed less reluctant to make their financial contributions toward the event.

This change was tied to the uncertainty of what would befall the seniors after graduating in a time of war. Although some students debated the propriety of holding proms in wartime, other students felt the war made prom into an even more important cap to their high school lives. In Milwaukee, West Side High School's junior class debated holding a prom in 1945: "An important question to be discussed is whether or not a prom should be held. Because of the war, the expense of formal clothing and decorations is much greater than formerly. However, the fact that the prom is one of the prime experiences of a high school student's life will not be ignored."³⁹ Students recognized that the prom might seem frivolous in wartime, but they argued for its significance in marking off the student life they had known.

Prom had additional poignancy when male students going off to war were undergoing another rite of passage. Mission High School seniors graduating in the spring of 1944 began soliciting contributions from students of all classes and faculty members a year in advance to make their prom an elaborate event for their class. Prom committee members circulated a purple box with the plea "Help the Seniors! Give for the Prom! Thanks." The seniors received contributions ranging from "an unwanted shirt button to a shiny, new fifty-cent piece." While the yearbook gently mocked the seniors for going "aristocratic" and "ultra-swanky" and needing the help of other class years, its writers also felt that this lavishness was deserved in wartime. Students were alert to the likelihood of boys entering military service: "Sometimes a contributor growls a bit ... but he doesn't really mean it, for everybody is glad to help the seniors have one last good time before they are plunged into the madness of a world at war."⁴⁰ These students saw the prom as a "worthy cause" to donate to. Students' desire to bring back a more sophisticated prom then seemed to reflect their view that not only was prom one last celebration of youth before being shoved into a sudden adulthood by war, but also prom might provide male students with an imaginary idyllic adulthood to cherish returning to, after they had lost their youth to war.

The war found its way into proms through Victory themes, such as at Milwaukee's West Division High School's 1942 prom, where students decorated their gymnasium with a wooden Statue of Liberty. As a further sign of students' willingness to spend to achieve the desired prom, they also raised the ticket price from \$1.00 to \$1.50 to pay for a more expensive orchestra.⁴¹ Wauwatosa donated dance proceeds to the Red Cross.⁴² West Side students also incorporated the Victory theme by encouraging the wearing of war stamp corsages: "Each girl can send to those absent boys a sincere message of hope and sympathy by wearing a prom bouquet – not orchid, gardenias nor sweet peas, but a colorful nosegay, fashioned by Uncle Sam and suitable for any wartime dance frock from the prom queen's down. A War stamp corsage is always in season.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Junior Class Will Hold First Meeting This Morning, Make Election Plans," *The Comet* (West Division newspaper), April 25, 1945, 1.

⁴⁰ *The Mission* (Mission High School yearbook) (1944), 98.

⁴¹ "This Year's Junior Prom Date, June 6," *The Comet* (West Division Newspaper), May 20, 1942, 1.

⁴² "Jack and Toddy – That's the Prom," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 27, 1944, 5.

Wear one at the 1943 prom.”⁴³ With this war stamp adaptation, girls still got to show off corsages but also support the war effort. An adaptation of formality was lent credence by patriotism.

This revival of proms in wartime led students at Wauwatosa High School, which still had its restrictions against corsages in place during the war, to begin voicing opinions in favor of allowing corsages. The ban remained in place through 1944 when the student newspaper noted, “To follow the rule of the last eight Proms, no corsages will be permitted.”⁴⁴ However, two years earlier, when the school newspaper asked prom king Gil White if corsages should be worn to prom, he responded: “Yes. In my opinion, if every boy can afford to take a girl to the Prom and then take her some place after the dance he can well afford to buy her a corsage.” White believed boys could purchase something simple and in keeping with their girls’ wishes. Queen Joan Meier was more tempered in her answer: “As long as it has been requested that no corsages be worn at the Prom, I feel there is little more to be said. Only this, fellows. Why not buy your date a nice inexpensive flower for her hair and maybe for her wrist? I’m sure any girls would be just as pleased with that as she would be with an elaborate corsage.” While Meier did not want to contradict the school’s regulation against corsages, she did suggest a loophole for boys to provide girls with flowers. Meier did have an awareness of the cost, and urged girls to be understanding if boys did not get them flowers, “Maybe I’m wrong, but after all, girls, the fellows have to buy a ticket; and show you a good time between twelve and ... well don’t you see? That calls for money, too.”⁴⁵

While the prom king and queen surely represented a privileged portion of the school and a portion that was more likely to boost prom, their statements illustrate a changing tide. White seemed to view corsages as a marginal added cost which completed the prom experience. Indeed, the school decided to revive corsages in the spring of 1945 though the student council still set a price limit on flowers at \$1.50 to discourage competition over flowers.⁴⁶ Students had been aware of the loophole suggested by Meier, as the school’s newspaper editors pointed out in an editorial about the confusion over the flower policy at dances. “When corsages are not permitted, is it permissible for girls to wear flowers in their hair? The question has never been clearly stated. If we are to have a ban on corsages, or if flowers will not be permitted, or if flowers are sanctioned, let’s hear about it.”⁴⁷ This revival of corsages at Wauwatosa provides an indication of how postwar students would embrace the formal prom.

The uncertainty of a society at war after graduation meant high school students were more unified in reviving the more elaborate aspects of proms. Although wartime meant that not everything could be indulged, students felt that the threat of war justified the creation of warm memories of home, of which prom was an important one. Student newspapers did not voice the concerns of classmates who opposed the return of greater formality. Instead they portrayed these proms as a show of class unity, almost like patriotism in war. Male students going off to war sharpened youth’s awareness of the transition to adulthood that would occur upon graduation, and formal proms as a rite of passage allowed students one night to imagine a happier, alternate version of the future.

⁴³ “Uncle Sam’s Orchids Can Replace Posies,” *The Comet* (West Division Newspaper), May 26, 1943, 2.

⁴⁴ “Jack and Toddy – That’s the Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa High School), April 27, 1944, 5.

⁴⁵ “If You Ask Me: Should Corsages Be Worn to Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 1, 1942, 4.

⁴⁶ “Lanterns, Benches, Bandstand Set Theme for Prom Tonight,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 4, 1945, 1.

⁴⁷ “Flowers or Not?” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), October 5, 1945, 2.

The prom tradition then entered the postwar period with many of its formal trappings restored. Without the challenges of the Depression or the war, students indulged in their prom fantasies to an even greater degree. When students wrote in their own newspapers and yearbooks about their proms, they rarely portrayed their expectations for the prom as anything but grand. In 1951, a student at San Francisco's Mission High School wrote, "As Cinderella awaited the Grand ball, so does each Senior girl look forward to the Senior Prom on June 2. The night comes, and like Cinderella, she waits for her Prince Charming to arrive. He comes with corsage, car and all, and she is ready. They now leave with a dreamy look in her eye, he with a gleam in his. For this is a night they will always remember – 'The Senior Prom.'" The student then went on to enthuse about how prom would actually be even better than the Cinderella fairy tale for "certainly [this] Cinderella's gown will not fade into rags at Midnight."⁴⁸ Cinderella's transformation paralleled students' own transition to adulthood through the ritual of prom.

Schools with a tradition of holding their proms off campus continued to seek out hotels and restaurants as venues for this rite of passage. Pat Slinari, a student at Hanover Park High School in New Jersey, confirmed this custom had also taken root at his school when he wrote to *Senior Scholastic* in 1962, "The Senior Prom is the only dance not held at the school. It may be held at any restaurant selected by the Class Council."⁴⁹ In the 1950s, these hotels catered dinners for Mission High School students of "salad, turkey, and strawberry sherbet"⁵⁰ or "crab cocktails, turkey and strawberry parfaits."⁵¹ For the students on the prom committee to meet with the hotel's head caterer was to step into the adult world of decision-making and negotiations. Baltimore students also continued holding proms in hotels. Baltimore City College held its 1967 Senior Prom at the Eastwind ballroom. "The Eastwind is the only hall in this area that can accommodate the 750 couples we expect to come," explained Chairman Clyde Jeffers. "Besides, the Eastwind is the only place around that's elegant enough for City College's Senior Prom."⁵² Students still focused on these venues as providing additional panache to their proms.

Students continued to cite formal dress as contributing to the prom's significance. Thomas Konke, a South Division High School junior, commented, "I'm looking forward to it because it will be my first formal affair. Also I'm sure when I'm a bachelor of fifty, I'll look back on it with fondest memories."⁵³ Konke anticipated prom being memorable due to it being the first formal event in his youth, and he expected it to still be meaningful in his adult life. A female student recalled her prom, "The ceremony in which the king and queen were crowned was quite impressive. It gave the prom an atmosphere of elegance which set it apart from other school dances."⁵⁴ This greater elegance contributed to the prom's importance in her mind. In 1947, a Wauwatosa High School article mocked the level of formality at prom: "Due to the formality of dress, the atmosphere might be a bit stuffy. Whistling, stamping, and catcalls will help to temper the formality of the occasion."⁵⁵ While poking fun at the formality by calling it stuffy, the student thus reaffirmed that loud or wild behavior was inappropriate at the prom. Students were eager to experience prom as a formal event and were willing to tailor their

⁴⁸ "Cinderella Awaits – Senior Prom to be Held June 2," *West Wing* (Mission High School), April 27, 1951, 1.

⁴⁹ "Jam Session – Do You Approve of Proms?" *Senior Scholastic*, December 5, 1962, 26.

⁵⁰ Lona Darbo, "Prom Proves Huge Success; All Happy," *West Wing* (Mission High School), June 10, 1952, 1.

⁵¹ "Prominent Guests Attend Senior Prom," *West Wing* (Mission High School), June 12, 1951, 1.

⁵² "Chairman Unveils Senior Week Slate," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), April 7, 1967, 1.

⁵³ Patricia Peters, "It's Later Than You Think; Prom Time Draw Near," *The Cardinal* (South Division), March 23, 1956, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ "Men In White Coats Will Soon Call For You, Girls," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 1, 1947, 2.

behavior to honor the level of formality by acting as responsible adults. “‘It has been found that the students behave very well at such affairs,’ stated Mrs. Adele Cichocki, math teacher at Pulaski High School [Milwaukee].”⁵⁶

With postwar prosperity, students were quick to adopt formality and ignore issues of inclusion. In 1946, the Wauwatosa school newspaper referred to their prom as “completely formal.”⁵⁷ A South Division student did a survey of the nine high schools in Milwaukee, and noted that proms were formal or at least semi-formal.⁵⁸ One reporter anticipated a prom of “soft light, glowing faces, lovely girls in lovely gowns, handsome boys in handsome tuxedos, and dreamy music to dance to.”⁵⁹ Student newspapers no longer mentioned class meetings to discuss formality levels, and instead simply embraced a high standard of formality in their articles. Instead of considering alternate forms of dress as a class, the concession that student newspapers made to the high costs of prom was to emphasize the importance of planning. With careful planning, student reporters assumed their classmates could bring forth the appropriate wardrobe items. Just as social mobility during this period was seen as more accessible due to the postwar economic boom, students saw formalwear, which represented a higher social status as well as maturity, as more within everyone’s reach than before.

Many of these articles were aimed at boys as they issued pleas to give the girls enough time to prepare. While such planning had occurred earlier, now the preparation was linked explicitly to cost. In 1946, South Division High School held its first prom since the early twentieth century. For this revived prom, its school newspaper ran an editorial asking boys to be “certain she [has] plenty of time so she can get that million dollar formal picked out and ready to wear.”⁶⁰ While there was a joking tone toward the cost of a girl’s dress, the emphasis that girls need time to plan their dress remained. A few years later, another article by a South Division student also stressed the importance of inviting a girl to prom well in advance: “Don’t wait until the beginning of May to ask your favorite South miss, but get up the courage today. Be considerate. If the girl has a formal, the situation isn’t too desperate; if she has to buy a new one, it’s hard on the pocketbook to secure a gown two weeks before the big event.”⁶¹ South Division editors again argued in 1956 that girls needed more than a day or two before the prom to “buy a formal or arrange to borrow one.”⁶² While this last article allowed that a girl might need to borrow a formal dress rather than purchase one herself, it was clear that borrowing a dress was not the preferred means of acquiring formalwear for prom night. In 1953, a student article mentioned: “The girls [who are going to prom] all seem to have a happy smile while talking to their friends about the dress they bought and how expensive it is.”⁶³ Female students celebrated buying their dresses for prom, and students’ articles implied that girls needed adequate time to prepare. Their discussion of planning echoes their discussion of responsibly managing finances in order to put on school dances. These articles display students’ assumptions that classmates would be able to afford the prom and also reveal an ignorance of, or lack of sympathy for

⁵⁶ “Nine High Schools in City Support Traditional Proms,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), February 8, 1946, 4.

⁵⁷ “Tosteson, Preston to Reign Over Junior Prom on May 11,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1946, 1.

⁵⁸ “Nine High Schools in City Support Traditional Proms,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), February 8, 1946, 4.

⁵⁹ “Plans for Senior Prom Running Smoothly,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), November 17, 1950, 3.

⁶⁰ “Men Wall Flowers Become Murrays,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), February 27, 1946, 2.

⁶¹ “Boys! Get Your Date for Prom Now,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), April 14, 1949, 2.

⁶² Patricia Peters, “It’s Later Than You Think; Prom Time Draw Near,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), March 23, 1956, 2.

⁶³ “Take a Hint, Boys; the Prom Means a Lot to the Girls,” *The Cardinal* (South Division), May 8, 1953, 2.

students who were unable to participate due to the cost. Prom had been solidly cast as a formal event in their minds.

Girls also wrote articles to remind boys to take time preparing for prom. A female student urged her male classmates at South Division in 1956: "Don't wait until the last minute and then discover your financial status is too low. If you start pinching pennies now, by prom time you'll have enough money to rent a tux, buy a ticket, and pay for a corsage."⁶⁴ Again, she implied that if he just planned ahead, a boy could easily save money for prom necessities. Boys not only should purchase corsages, but also coordinate with their dates so the flowers matched the girls' dresses. Girls at Wauwatosa High School penned the following advice, "Another thing, fellas, if you are giving her flowers, ask your date what color formal she is wearing. Flowers, everyone knows, are high this year so you won't want to spend your money on red carnations and then find out that your Jane is wearing a pink dress. She'll appreciate your thoughtfulness, too."⁶⁵ The female authors understood that flowers cost money. In their view, boys who had to economize by buying carnations, which were less expensive than other flowers, should make sure they were purchasing the correct color rather than fail to provide their dates with appropriate flowers.

In 1969, Wauwatosa students with the humorous pseudonyms of Eve Ningown, Sue Tcote, and Cora Sazh, joked, "All the boys are sweating about the bills for this big ordeal. If you've noticed a few members of the male set growing skinnier, it's because they've sacrificed their delicious lunches to save the lunch money. Oh well, fellows, you just have to give up your next six allowances to finance the big night. That's not so bad. ... Despite all this everyone still loves prom."⁶⁶ While these girls remained aware of the prom's costs, they expected that students could do what was necessary to pay for prom merely by planning to save money. They suggested that saving for prom might require sacrifice, but dismissed the notion of what boys needed to give up. Cost appeared as an annoyance rather than as a true obstacle. Students expected their rite of passage to occur without being hindered by any real financial complications.

Formality was firmly entrenched as a requirement of prom; while there were still students with concerns about costs, there were fewer measures allowing them to wear less formal clothing. In 1963, Baltimore City College's newspaper mentioned, "President Mark Barnett is discussing with two tuxedo companies the possibility of reducing rental charges."⁶⁷ While Barnett aimed at reducing costs for his classmates, the tuxedo remained the standard. Students further promoted formal attire by holding their own fashion shows at school. "Prom attire was modeled by South's juniors and seniors Friday, May 7, in Coblentz Hall. ... To promote the wearing and purchase of modest formals was the objective of this style show. Boys' prom wear was also shown."⁶⁸ Even if the formals presented were relatively modest in price, the assumption was that students would purchase new clothing for prom. Students there put on another show in 1955 with girls and boys modeling formals and a panel of six seniors speaking about prom etiquette. Part of the etiquette discussion involved what students should wear, and how students could buy the right clothes.⁶⁹ Holding these shows before prom emphasized students' beliefs in the virtues of preparation for everyone. This emphasis on planning was not merely about having

⁶⁴ Patricia Peters, "It's Later Than You Think; Prom Time Draw Near," *The Cardinal* (South Division), March 23, 1956, 2.

⁶⁵ "Fellas: Flowers, Formals Should Not Clash at Prom," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1946, 3.

⁶⁶ Eve Ningown, Sue Tcote, and Cora Sazh, "Around the Tower," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 30, 1969, 2.

⁶⁷ "June Week Ticket Prices Climb Despite Expense-Cutting Efforts," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), March 22, 1963, 1.

⁶⁸ "Program Shows Correct Prom Attire," *The Cardinal* (South Division), May 7, 1954, 1.

⁶⁹ "Prom Etiquette," *The Cardinal* (South Division), April 22, 1955, 1.

advance notice, but also about consuming and spending. In planning for prom, students were modeling responsible adult behavior. Student newspapers did not discuss limited means which were not surmountable by responsible planning for prom.

An article by a South Division High School student described students preparing for prom: "Mary scurries out to buy a formal and the right accessories while Johnny works on his dad for the family car. ... But all the preparation and excitement is worth while because ... it gives students a chance to exhibit their most polite and gracious selves; and it gives us a chance to prove that we are capable of handling the responsibility of a formal event."⁷⁰ They viewed the amount of preparation as demonstrating their level of responsibility; thus they prepared for prom as they prepared for adulthood. In fact, this preparation for adulthood resonated with students when South Division High School in Milwaukee began to hold its prom in 1946. The school's newspaper ran an editorial saying the "Success of Prom Depends on You," which made the point that "It adds to the color and fun of school days. In addition proms of this type will accustom the pupil to formal events in which he may participate later."⁷¹ This editorial connected prom to an ideal of adulthood where students could expect prosperous lives filled with formal events, much in the same way earlier students tied dancing to their hopes for the future. While this rhetoric, which had surrounded all school dances prewar, subsided for casual dances in the postwar era, it remained in place for the prom. The prom's formality made it continue to resonate as an event that ushered students into adulthood.

The emphasis on planning and spending for prom found its way into prom organizers' attitudes about the event. At South Division High School's first prom, student organizers were concerned about the prom being financially-self-sufficient but also argued that the prom was not a time to hold back. An editorial urging students to attend the prom said, "An occasion of this type is not a money making affair. An outstanding orchestra has to be hired, refreshments served, and decorations installed. This all costs money and can only be paid for if the attendance is sufficiently large."⁷² Rather than spend less on a prom's music or decorations, student leaders relied on high attendance levels. At Baltimore City College during the 1960s, prom remained the central event of seniors' June Week celebrations, which included casual dances, a banquet, and other activities. Costs for the week's events rose enormously as did class sizes. Between 1961 and 1962, the cost of putting on their June Week increased by over \$2500 to reach \$8500 total in 1962.⁷³ The cited reason for the greater expense was the larger class size. Seniors were projected to buy enough tickets to warrant the added expenses and produce a \$1200 profit. Students toyed with different methods to deal with rising costs, such as cutting out prom favors or eliminating one of the casual dances that was part of the week's festivities, but with events continuing to sell out, students did not make serious efforts to rein in expenses.⁷⁴ Enough students had decided that prom was a necessary high school rite.

Students recognized in 1964 that "though universally recognized as a memorable and enjoyable experience, Senior Week has also long been a financial burden to many seniors."⁷⁵ However, they did not see a reason to significantly decrease the cost of the events associated with it. The discount offered to students buying a package of tickets to every event was minimal,

⁷⁰ "Prom Memories Linger On," *The Cardinal* (South Division), May 18, 1951, 1.

⁷¹ "Success of Prom Depends on You," *The Cardinal* (South Division), February 8, 1946, 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ "June Week Budget Tops \$8500; Six Events Slated," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), May 11, 1962, 1.

⁷⁴ Dennis Hurwitz, "Seniors To 'Whoop It Up' During 16-Day 'Week,'" *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), May 24, 1963, 2.

⁷⁵ June Week, *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), March 26, 1964, 2.

so any student really wishing to save money had to buy individual tickets to fewer events. The only acknowledgment that some students might not be able to afford the week's events lay in the creation of the opportunity to "receive free Prom tickets for soliciting \$10 worth of ads for the playbill and both Prom and Banquet tickets for \$20 in ads."⁷⁶ This offer continued to put forward the assumption that any student could attend the prom if he planned far enough ahead.

In the postwar period, students continued to celebrate prom as a formal event and saw fit to add to its elaborate nature. A 1967 article in the *New York Times* observed that senior proms were costlier than ever as students sought to dance at fancy hotels rather than in school auditoriums or gyms. A senior class advisor at one high school in Queens commented, "I think it's outrageous, but they don't mind at all."⁷⁷ Despite this observation, some students remained critical of the cost of formal proms. A 1970 editorial in the newspaper at San Francisco's Mission High School commented on the great amount of money spent by seniors to accord with tradition and cynically calling senior year a "thinly disguised" "money trap." The piece tallied up the expenses for an evening of prom: tickets in 1970 may have been "only" five dollars, "but of course, the couples will dress formally. Some of the guys will rent tuxedos and the girls will wear formal gowns (after an expensive hair-do, why not?). There will also have to be a corsage for the girl and prom pictures are a 'must.' Expenditures will range constantly up, depending on how far the guy is willing to go in order to impress his date."⁷⁸ The piece estimated that the total costs of prom expenses were \$27 at a minimum with an additional cost of prom pictures starting at \$3.50.

Yet the editors noted, in spite of their complaints, "after all, the prom is a special night. But perhaps more important, the prom will have a deeper value, however costly; seniors can pretend that they're upper-middle-class for one night."⁷⁹ This association of social class with formality reflected a student culture that conflated social mobility with adulthood. Students over the course of the twentieth century had absorbed the hope that a high school education would fit them for a higher station in life. According to them, the prom was a worthwhile experience as it gave them a glimpse of that brighter future and proved instructive for later interactions. In 1962, Gilbert Ackerman, a student at Windthorst School in Spearville, Kansas, wrote to *Scholastic*, "It's true that a prom is a time-consuming and expensive project, but it is also an invaluable experience that is fun for the host group and gives them a great sense of responsibility." He expected prom would be "one of the most pleasant memories of my high school days." Another student John Cook, from Santa Maria High School in California, concurred, writing, "I think proms are important because they give a young adult a chance to learn how to act at big formal occasions."⁸⁰ Students continued to value formality at the prom as a harbinger of the prosperity they hoped to experience after high school. Prom was preparation for their adult lives. Thus formality was a defining feature of the prom for these students who considered it a rite of passage.

Students thus saw this formality as lending prom its significance as a rite of passage. Compared with other school events, prom was more formal and thus a closer imitation of adulthood. In students' view, adulthood connoted sophistication, a corollary of the social

⁷⁶ "Midseniors Reserve 130 Prom Tics," *The Oriole* (Baltimore City College), January 19, 1962, 1.

⁷⁷ Robert Windeler, "Seniors Are Leaving Gyms Behind to Swing at Costlier Proms," *New York Times*, 12 June 1967, 47.

⁷⁸ "Graduation ... A Priceless (?) Experience," *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 20, 1970, 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ "Jam Session," *Senior Scholastic*, December 5, 1962, 26.

mobility that their high school educations would provide them. Students thus desired to hold proms off campus in order to feel independent from their school setting and interact in adult spaces. This formality though inhibited another purpose of the prom – to join classmates together in celebration. With expectations of formal attire, students were divided in their ability to afford the event. The prom as a rite of passage drew some of its import from formality but also depended on the cohort's participation.

During the Great Depression, this tension came to a head as students met and debated the merits of formality and class participation as traditions. While they sought to forge a class consensus in these meetings, discussions often revealed divisions. Some students and administrators made efforts to keep prom more accessible and preserve class unity, but others called for formality as essential to a proper prom. Although students took different sides on this question, they still felt that they, rather than teachers, should determine the path that prom would take; thus they valued autonomy as part of a ceremony that helped them feel grown up. A commitment to formality managed to survive the Depression as students made compromises that still preserved a higher standard of attire for the prom, though they may not have been able to afford tuxedos.

World War II, despite its shortages, led to a revival of formality as students were determined to provide male graduates with an alternate vision of adult life due to their uncertain fate. By the postwar period, formality was even more firmly enshrined as a key characteristic of prom. Student newspapers still contained complaints about costs, but no longer published calls for less formal attire. The concession to comments about prom expenses was to emphasize planning, and the topic of divisions in the class status of students was papered over. There was no longer a forum where students questioned the trappings of prom. In the postwar period, prosperity was more widespread, and prom organizers assumed that their classmates would be able to attain that level of formality through careful planning. This insistence on formality reflected how students still tied it to maturity, and the postwar economy left them better positioned to realize that idealized adulthood. Prom had weathered the Great Depression and World War II as a rite of passage, and was inscribed upon youth culture as a formal event which students believed would prepare them for adulthood and social mobility.

Chapter 4

The Reign of the Prom King

In 1962, a student at Wauwatosa High School wrote, “The word ‘Prom’ can be described in many ways; more commonly, perhaps is soft lights, pink chiffon, romance, flowers, sparkles, music and heaven. But to the majority of juniors, the word ‘Prom’ is a synonym for ‘War!’”¹ This war was the annual battle to elect a prom king. Each year, campaigns by prom king candidates and their supporters overtook the school since the tradition began in the late 1920s. Wauwatosa students were particularly passionate about their elections, but students at high schools across the Milwaukee area had vigorous contests to become prom king. By declaring prom to be synonymous with war, this student identified prom as not just one night of dancing but as a larger series of events that included an intense campaign process for prom king. Students glorified the prom through their prolonged anticipation of the event, and the prom king campaigns and elections were an important part of building up to the dance.

Besides the competition among prom king candidates for the crown, there were also struggles between students and adults over how the prom king contests represented each group’s vision of adulthood. Milwaukee-area students began the tradition without much adult input and thus had a decade and a half to define the role of prom king in accordance with their conceptions of their future selves. When school officials started to pay closer attention to the selection of the prom king in the postwar era, they began to intervene and regulate those campaigns in an attempt to instill a sense of responsibility in students. The prom thus featured generational conflict as youth and adults had different ideas about how campaign procedures reflected on the younger generation’s future potential. Where students saw displays of sociability and autonomy, adults saw rambunctious shenanigans. The results of increased supervision by teachers and administrators after World War II show an ongoing negotiation between adults and students over how their different conceptions of adulthood were embodied in the prom king elections. This chapter focuses exclusively on Milwaukee-area schools because schools located in the other two cities in my research, San Francisco and Baltimore, did not have prom royalty.

The interactions between Milwaukee-area educators and students with regard to electing the prom king focused on two matters: first, what type of student would become the prom king, and second, the spirited nature of the campaigns. From both perspectives, the prom king represented the ideal student who was prepared for adult success. Adults thought the prom king should display responsibility as measured in academic excellence, but in students’ eyes, success would hinge on social skills and popularity. Interestingly, neither group spent much time discussing the necessary attributes of the prom queen, whose selection was the prerogative of the prom king. In examining the campaigns, adults hoped they would be a proving ground for maturity and democratic participation and did not appreciate their boisterousness; however, to students, that rowdiness signified a celebration of autonomy and self-expression. In both arenas, students and administrators prioritized different aspects of the adult experience. While administrators tried to rein in students’ exuberance, they largely adopted a permissive attitude rather than a punitive one. This shift toward a more accommodating stance among adults more widely will be further addressed in the next chapter.

¹ “Bugni Reigns Supreme,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa High School), April 18, 1962, 1.

The prom king contest became an annual feature in Milwaukee-area high schools during the late 1920s. Like the tradition of prom itself, electing a prom king was another custom that originated among college students. The prom king was a descendent of Yale's Spoon Man, who led the promenade at the university's junior prom. Since 1910, Milwaukee high school students could follow the elections of prom kings at nearby Wisconsin universities such as Marquette University in Milwaukee. For these high school youth, holding their own prom king contests allowed them to further emulate the customs of older college students who seemed the epitome of sophistication. Years after implementing their own proms around the turn of the century, high school students continued to be fascinated by college culture into the 1920s; college students continued to hold sway as role models for adulthood who led a covetable lifestyle.

The 1929 short story, "A Case of Stuffing," by West Division High School student William Quinn shows how high school students idolized undergraduate life in this era. The story revolved around competing college fraternities stuffing the ballot box so each could get victory for their candidate. Relying on a moderate student turnout for the election, these fraternity brothers crammed the box with additional ballots, not realizing that their rival fraternity has attempted the same thing until the total number of ballots was revealed to be greater than the school's total population.² The behavior of older college students was the subject of many high school literary efforts, and Quinn's choice of fraternity brothers in particular speaks to a mix of admiration and envy for their privilege and status among their peers. The story clearly portrays the fraternity brothers as heroic compared with their classmates who did not turn out for the election.

As discussed in Chapter Two, during the early twentieth century, high school students had followed suit in creating their own fraternity chapters at their schools until adult administrations banned the groups. To male high school students, fraternities were not just a group of their peers; these organizations served to mirror the activities of collegiate men who seemed paragons of status and adulthood. Yet as with fraternities, the prom king elections attracted increasing adult scrutiny. Educators felt that prom kings should represent the qualities that they tried to instill in students: good behavior and academic performance. However, students continued to tout their own values surrounding popularity as key to choosing a prom king. Because both youth and adults saw the prom king as an important representative of their goals for adulthood, school principals and teachers realized that in order to promote their own vision of the prom king, they would have to meet students partway. Educators sought to regulate the elections rather than attempt to shut them down.

Quinn's story was published during the period when high school prom king elections were beginning at many Milwaukee-area high schools. Even without the prom king title, high school students had begun electing classmates to lead them in the promenade. By 1927, in the Milwaukee suburb of Wauwatosa, a high school boy was the prom chairman and led the grand march in 1927 with the junior class president second in line.³ The Wauwatosa High School newspaper's first use of the phrase "prom king" did not occur until 1930 when an article proclaimed Newton Held prom king after he won the election to be prom chairman.⁴ However, the next year, the prom king election became divorced from the choice of prom chairman when these positions were held by two different boys. The junior class met in an assembly to elect an

² William Quinn, "A Case of Stuffing," *The Comet* (West Division High School), April 1929, 15.

³ "Junior Prom a Grand Success," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 20, 1927, 1.

⁴ "Newton Held Prom King, Annual Junior Prom May 10," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 25, 1930, 1.

executive committee, separate from the class officers to lead the prom. Then a week later, they met again and voted for prom king. Thus at Wauwatosa High School, the prom king became a sought-after role in its own right. The school newspaper's coverage of prom king elections dwarfed coverage of the prom chairman; prom king was the more highly coveted role and his duties were relatively light.

However, students at nearby Milwaukee schools kept other offices attached to the role. At West Division High School, the winner of the junior class presidency automatically also received the title of prom king by tradition. At many high schools nationwide, a male student customarily held the office of class president, so linking the two positions merely reaffirmed students' expectation of male leadership. Student newspaper coverage of the election emphasized the role of prom king more than class president; the prom king title often eclipsed the presidential position that conferred it. In 1942, the West Division newspaper treated presidential candidates as if they had primarily "signified their intention to compete for the honor of leading the prom."⁵ The association of prom king with these executive responsibilities reflected students' observations of gender norms in the adult world where men occupied leadership roles. Across town at South Division High School, students had been prevented from holding proms for a forty-year period and only resumed holding proms in 1946 with an annual junior-senior affair. They immediately began choosing a prom king and conferred that honor on their prom chairman, who had the power to appoint subcommittee chairmen as well as the task of overseeing each subcommittee's progress.⁶ In coupling these two roles, South Division students also ensured that the prom chairman would always be a boy.

Even though the official duties of the prom king varied from school to school, the one constant feature was his leading of the grand march, or the actual promenade portion of the prom. The king also chose the girl who would be his partner in this march, the prom queen, and their coronation would most often follow the grand march. Thus the king was an elected position, the queen an appointed one. The honor of crowning the prom royalty was occasionally held by fellow students, but more often, the school principal or class advisor conducted the ceremony. Frequently, the parents of the prom king and queen were on hand to witness this moment, since the royal couple was expected to enlist their parents to act as chaperones for the dance.

This adult oversight of the event gave tacit approval to the prom king selection, and students reported little interference from adult administrators during prom king campaigns in their newspapers. Left to their own devices as the 1930s progressed, students engaged in campaigns for the title of prom king with increasing intensity. Elections at Wauwatosa High School regularly had ten to twelve nominees, and the school's *Cardinal News* reported widespread excitement about the election each year. Students were very excited about the election for days before their assembly, and "just before the meeting was called to order, the arguments, bets, and guesses continued."⁷ While student reporters may have exaggerated the level of anticipation, the depiction of a number of students discussing the possible candidates and possibly wagering on them suggests that students were genuinely invested in the process of choosing their prom king.

⁵ "Juniors Plan to Organize Soon," *The Cardinal* (West Division), April 1, 1942, 1.

⁶ "Seniors Elect Prom King," *The Cardinal* (South Division High School), April 6, 1951, 1.

⁷ "James Nichols and Jackie Peterson to Lead the 1934 Junior Prom," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 20, 1934, 1.

Without much adult interest in the elections, students quickly established their own patterns for choosing a prom king in the late 1920s and 1930s. To students, the prom king ought be the embodiment of youthful ideals, and a number of boys stepped forward each year to vie for the position. With so much competition, students had the opportunity to define that ideal in terms of the qualities that they associated with adulthood; they tied popularity to the social skills necessary for their future mobility. Yet, when students' prom king selection process eventually grabbed the attention of adult administrators in the late 1930s, principals and teachers started to impose their own conception of an ideal youth on the contests. In preferring certain qualities to others, both groups considered which would be assets later in life, but the qualities valued by the administration did not always match up with the qualities appreciated by the students. While principals and teachers sought to impose their views of who should become prom king through rules about grades and eligibility, students believed in rewarding less solemn qualities and often did so in their voting.

After approximately a decade of letting students largely design prom king contests, administrators saw the importance of the prom king elections to students and advised them to consider values such as scholastic achievement and responsibility. Principals and teachers viewed these traits as contributing to a successful life and believed they should have application in the contest for prom king. Schools imposed academic standards on students' eligibility to run for prom king. West Division High School in 1939 deemed the leading candidate for junior class president, and hence prom king, ineligible due to his having grade failures.⁸ Since the two offices were bundled together, this example leaves some uncertainty over whether this ruling was about the academic achievements befitting a prom king or a class president, but later examples show principals and teachers clearly advocating for certain academic standards in prom king competitions.

These standards were most evident at South Division High School where the school's newspaper quoted for several years in a row the principal or prom adviser speaking about how the prom kings should have good grades and other characteristics. In 1948, the school's principal acknowledged the importance of the prom king position and counseled students that "a wise choice for prom king is necessary." He deemed a king's essential qualities to be "passing grades, leadership, and ability to arrange and direct the business end of the dance."⁹ He thus urged students to focus on the academic and practical abilities of the king when casting their votes. Similarly, Wauwatosa High School imposed a grade point average restriction later in 1959 so that students had to have an average above 80 to be eligible for prom king, and a teacher-led committee of students maintained that standard the next year.¹⁰ Later rules further specified that the prom king could not repeatedly be on the detention list. These adults valued good grades and tried to steer students towards that criterion by imposing it as a determinant of eligibility. In emphasizing responsibility, educators hoped to prompt students to reward their classmates who demonstrated good behavior as defined by adults. Administrators probably looked favorably on rules tying the prom king title to the office of student president in the belief that student government participants were a self-selecting group. Regardless, these educators recognized that students would want to consider other factors.

⁸ "Copoulos, Rodgers, Kaegi Are Junior Class Leaders," *The Comet* (West Division), April 19, 1939, 4.

⁹ "January, June Classes To Elect Prom King," *The Cardinal* (South Division), December 10, 1948, 1.

¹⁰ "Kasdorf, Jenkins, Kress, Olson Elected Junior Class Officers," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 23, 1959, 1.

Aware of the influence that candidates' popularity had over students' votes, an English teacher at Wauwatosa High School, Esther Olson, decided to write a play about that very subject for students to perform at school in the spring of 1945. She had observed the competition for prom king in her own homeroom and then received encouragement from her publisher to write the play, *Prom King*.¹¹ While she evidently meant the play to be fun for student audiences, she also made her characters into instructive stereotypes. Her play was thus a gentle attempt by an adult authority figure to put her stamp on students' ideas of who should become prom king. In particular, the play sought to persuade young audience members to reevaluate the characteristics that conferred popularity.

The play's fictional prom king competition was about a senior prom rather than the junior prom that Wauwatosa held. However, just as at Wauwatosa, this prom king did not occupy any additional offices but was an independent position. The school newspaper reported on the different characters and which male students would play them: "Bruce will take the part of Steve Meredith, a very popular high school senior. ... [There's] a senior boy who always tells jokes that no one laughs at, and ... Don, a wealthy student who tries to buy his way to popularity. Bill Leibbrook will play Bob, a senior up for prom king, who never dated a girl. The part of Jack, an average high school senior, will be taken by Bob Fox."¹² Olson sought to show students that popularity was not dependent on wealth, by portraying rich Don in a negative light, and to encourage students to consider classmates who might be shyer, like Bob. Throughout *Prom King*, Olson used stereotypical student characters to promote her adult opinion about popularity among the student body.

Teachers and administrators therefore recognized that their priorities in selecting a prom king differed from students, but sought to emphasize the qualities that they valued. In 1950, Estelle Stone, the prom adviser at South Division High School, increased the grade qualification while also acknowledging other aspects of the prom king role. She commented to the school newspaper, "Since the king must manage all prom affairs, social ease, leadership and a good sense of responsibility are requirements for the candidates. Personality and an 80 scholarship average are important, too."¹³ In using the terms personality and "social ease," Stone yielded to students' view that candidates' likability ought to be a factor in the selection process, yet she did not shy away from insisting that the king meet grade requirements and also exhibit responsibility. Rather than take a hard-line stance about the utmost importance of grades, teachers like Olson and Stone exhibited respect for students' traditions and preferences. Particularly in the postwar era, this attitude extended beyond the schools and into the wider community, and this trend will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Despite the efforts of teachers and principals to emphasize students' responsibility and grades in electing the prom king starting in the late 1930s, students writing about the prom king campaigns still encouraged students to focus more on candidates' social aptitude and less on their academic record throughout the following decades. One editorial from 1940 in Milwaukee's West Division High School newspaper was titled, "Prom King Should Have Social Ease." That piece and another from 1942 argued that because the junior president would not merely hold that office but also become prom king, students should consider different qualifications than they normally would for a class officer. The editors wrote, "Perhaps for the

¹¹ "Miss Olson's Play 'Prom King' Slated for April 27 Performance," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 23, 1945, 1.

¹² "'Prom King' Director Chooses Cast for April 27 Production," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 23, 1945, 1.

¹³ "Seniors to Elect King for Prom," *The Cardinal* (South Division), March 3, 1950, 1.

first time in his voting career a student need not consider whether his choice has an average in the nineties and has been in the local honor society since his freshman year. Other facts must be considered. This is the time for pleasing personality and social ease to receive their compensation.”¹⁴ The editors thus urged students to prioritize a candidate’s sociability over his grades and scholastic achievements. While the piece paid lip service to administrators’ views that academic criteria should be key factors in selecting class presidents, its inclusion of the word “perhaps” may have been a tongue-in-cheek allowance that students already were considering social criteria even as it hoped to paint the junior year as a justifiable exception to the usual rule. Even as they tried to explain and record their student customs surrounding prom, these student editors would have been mindful that teachers were reading their publications and tried to make their views palatable to that audience as well. The 1942 editorial deemed that juniors should choose someone who displayed “executive ability, co-operation and most important, dependability” but asserted that these qualities were not made apparent by grades.

Instead, students themselves would determine how these qualities were expressed among their peers. They must have believed these positive traits were nurtured by sports, for they frequently chose prom kings who were athletes; candidates’ popularity on the field or court repeatedly transitioned into successful campaigns. The student newspaper wrote of Wauwatosa’s 1939 prom king Pete Rasey, “The King’s popularity has been constantly attested. For instance, at the last game of the football season, the crowd set up the chant: ‘We want Rasey!’”¹⁵ Despite the fact that articles a few years later recalled Rasey leading a fairly elaborate campaign, this immediate article claimed that “Rasey’s campaign was not extensive. A few penciled posters were all that was needed to secure his election.” The article perhaps downplayed the efforts made by Rasey on account of wanting to portray him as so popular that he had little need for campaigning. Dick Philipp, who ultimately won the 1941 Wauwatosa High School election, “obtained his athletic letter in his freshman year, winning the captainship of the swimming team in his junior year.” Signs at the same school for students’ campaign touted their athletic involvement: “‘Crown swimming champ Wahler’; ... ‘Pass your votes to Quarterback Glenn Brown.’”¹⁶

This preference for athletic prom royalty continued in the postwar era. At South Division High School, between 1946 and 1965, seventeen prom kings in those twenty years were involved in athletics with twelve of them involved in three sports or more.¹⁷ Three prom kings from the 1950s were active not just in football, but also in basketball and track. A number were team captains, which perhaps served as evidence of their leadership ability, and were members of the emblem club, meaning they had athletic letters. Prom kings were most often involved in football, baseball, and basketball, again with most of them involved in multiple sports. Often the various candidates ranged across different sports, as if fans of each sport made up a different constituency. The 1962 election illustrated this pattern at Wauwatosa High School where one candidate was on the football team, another was in band and on the track team, the third was on the basketball team and an honor student, and the fourth was yet another football player.¹⁸ In setting rules for prom elections in 1960, Wauwatosa High School set the elections to “be held

¹⁴ “Prom King Should Have Social Ease,” *The Comet* (West Division), March 13, 1940, 2.

¹⁵ “Rasey Is Prom King,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 30, 1939, 1.

¹⁶ Connie Gerlach, “Wauwatosa Ponders Mystery of Disappearing Campaign Posters,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 13, 1949, 1.

¹⁷ This survey of South Division’s yearbooks is missing data from one year.

¹⁸ “Camelot’s Candidates,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 18, 1962, 1.

after the basketball season and before the track season” presumably out of recognition that most candidates were involved in athletics and campaigning could interfere with their participation in these sports.¹⁹ Students’ admiration of a candidate’s athletic feats translated into support for his campaign; students embraced candidates whose activities identified them as traditionally masculine. In accordance with gender norms for most of the twentieth century, they associated masculinity with leadership.

Candidates also gained ground through their involvement in other clubs as well as sports; candidates were almost always achievers in both sports and in other clubs. Both of these endeavors demonstrated school spirit, a sentiment very important to student life in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, Dick Philipp, the Wauwatosa prom king of 1941, “obtained his athletic letter in his freshman year, winning the captainship of the swimming team in his junior year. He is also a singer, originating a popular tune of his own, and is a member of the A capella choir.”²⁰ One student who became prom king at South Division High School without any listed involvement in school athletics boasted a resume of being on the Class Commission, the school’s yearbook, the Men’s Club, the Booster Club, and the Cardinal Capers, a talent show. The prom kings at South Division were most often involved in the Student Council, Class Commission, the school’s Men’s Club, and the Booster Club. A fair number were also members of the honor society and active in the school newspaper. These men’s clubs were further evidence of non-athletic male socializing, a form of networking at a young age. Prom kings were boys who excelled at the student culture that high school youth had created. While this excellence was not of the academic variety, it demonstrated a social prowess that students valued.

Included in students’ ideal set of social skills were dancing ability and good manners. At West Division High School, where the class president served as prom king, student editors in 1942 urged students to choose a candidate who could dance, and indeed argued that “all officers should be able to dance.” Their expectations here were not “that they glide with the ease of Fred Astaire or rhumba in the fashion of Carmen Miranda but they should be able really to be a part of the prom.”²¹ Knowing how to dance was important when one role of the office was to lead the most important dance of the year; they believed a major responsibility of the officers was to publicly serve in the prom. Therefore, skills in dancing were not seen as detracting from candidates’ masculinity but in fact were desired. While the glorification of athletes fits in with our contemporary understanding of masculinity, this admiration of dancing suggests that ideas of masculinity in the first half of the twentieth century embraced certain social graces as well.

Students valued refinement in their prom king; they expected him to carry himself well at a formal event as their representative. In 1940, West Division’s editors noted that the class president should be a gentleman. Two years later, the school’s editors agreed, “Manners and neatness of appearance are other requisites to be taken into consideration.”²² As prom king, the president should be a credit to his class by knowing how to behave appropriately and display good manners at the event. Gender norms at the time valued manners in men as well as women. Student editors urged students to select a class president who would “be an inspiration to the whole class in the plans for the annual prom.”²³ Students saw the prom king role as

¹⁹ “1960-61 Prom Campaign Rules,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 10, 1960, 1.

²⁰ “Swimming Ace Rules Prom; Stupendous Campaign Wins,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 19, 1941, 2.

²¹ “Juniors Should Scan Office Candidates,” *The Comet* (West Division), April 22, 1942, 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

encompassing more responsibilities than a standard presidency. They wanted him to be a representative of their cohort, but also to exhibit the maturity and poise of an adult who was at home in a formal environment; he was a symbol of their hope that high school would fit them for social mobility.

In these characteristics, prom kings demonstrated “social ease” and their suitability for adult life. All these attributes contributed to their lionization by peers writing in school newspapers. Although the prom king had certainly been a prominent student before his selection, he now became an even bigger campus celebrity. Many school newspapers in Milwaukee ran admiring profiles of students on the second page of each issue, especially of seniors, with short descriptions of the students’ likes and dislikes, the different activities they were involved in, who they were dating, or what traits they looked for in a date. These profiles positioned selected students as arbiters of taste for their peers, and the prom king often found himself the subject of one of these columns as well as additional interviews. When South Division High School resumed holding prom in 1946, its first prom king was Winfred Gross, who immediately became the subject of his school’s Senior Snap column. True to form, this piece trumpeted his attributes and accomplishments in activities, such as his involvement in the track and cross country teams as well as in the school’s Boys’ Club. The piece also discussed his future plans to attend Marquette College and become an athletic coach. With this projected career, Gross’s athleticism and extracurricular involvement seemed appropriate training. Students might have looked forward to the future, but they pictured their adult lives through the lens of their school experience and an idealized college life. Prom kings’ mastery of the school social world seemed to position them for adult success in the imaginations of their peers, and these annual newspaper profiles helped to perpetuate that attitude for successive cohorts of students.

These profiles of prom kings generally had an innocuous view of adulthood as students could not talk openly about the more risqué aspects of their private lives in a publication overseen by their teachers. Students did use humor though to hint at other aspects of adulthood that would not meet with the approval of school administrators. In 1938, the West Division High School ran an interview between John Towle, the editor of the school paper who also happened to be a member of that year’s royal court, and the newly-elected prom king Richard Hoffman. The interview was meant to demonstrate their adult wit in their banter and non-sequiturs. When Towle asked Hoffman how he feels about prom coming up, Hoffman answered, “Coach Bill Smith has deprived me of my Camels.” The implication that Hoffman had a smoking habit, even while knowing that cigarettes did not have adult approval, revealed a rebellious side to students’ ideas of sophistication. Towle also asked whether Hoffman thought anyone would “spike” the punch, and Hoffman answered, “No one at West has enough money to put a kick in the punch!”²⁴ In joking about students breaking the rules set by teachers, Towle and Hoffman cast themselves as knowing and clever. Hoffman’s rejoinder also implied his vast experience with drinking by boasting of his high tolerance and the inability to get him drunk with a weak punch. Under the guise of kidding around, Hoffman and Towle could get away with portraying themselves as engaging in behaviors usually set aside for grown-ups, a racier side of adulthood, though they still shied away from discussing anything sexual. While this interview was unrepresentative of the many prom king profiles published in the school papers, it shows students partaking in aspects of adult life that were not fit for children and defying the rules meant to prolong childhood innocence in their quest to grow up.

²⁴ John Towle, “Prom King Is Interviewed But Reporter Gets Nothing,” *The Comet* (West Division), June 1, 1938, 4.

School administrators and students each had their own ideal prom king based on their perception of adulthood. After students had spent most of the 1930s selecting kings according to their values, adults tried to promote academic achievement and responsibility through rules about eligibility. Still, they acknowledged that students would likely assert different values, ones regarding popularity, and were increasingly willing to accede that the prom king had a social role to fulfill. Students editorialized about social ease and dancing as qualities that would contribute to a successful prom king as well as to a future of social mobility, and they frequently elected boys who demonstrated that ease through their involvement in sports and various clubs. As a result of winning the election, these boys and their traits were further glorified in celebrity profiles written for school newspapers. Students associated leadership with adulthood, and they valued masculinity as expressed, not only in athleticism, but also in good manners and dancing ability. Although school publications were coy about students' private lives, youth did use humor in mentions of transgressive behaviors which seemed grown-up to them. Insisting upon their own values and thus their autonomy, students countered adults' ideas of adulthood. In favoring these traits for their prom kings, students revealed their youthful ideas of a socially-mobile adulthood based in getting along with peers and demonstrating social sophistication.

Enthusiasm for the prom king contests went beyond the candidates themselves. The process of campaigning drew in many classmates who participated in ratcheting up excitement for prom during the 1930s. The campaigns felt adult to students who organized and deployed slogans and posters. However, the fevered pitch of these campaigns struck educators as unruly, and in the years following World War II, schools began to insist upon circumscribed campaigns. They adopted several different approaches from involving students in election commissions to diverting student enthusiasm toward more acceptable avenues. Students' responses to these measures varied depending on how much adults considered youth's desires for autonomy and self-expression. Both adults and students had to contend with the other group's idea of adult behavior.

As the number of candidates running for prom king grew and the tradition became more established in the 1930s, students began to wage elaborate campaigns to emerge victorious in the competition. Despite having only a day between nomination and election in 1937, Wauwatosa's *Cardinal News* noted that candidates engaged in "vigorous publicity."²⁵ For candidates, it became standard to form a partnership with a male classmate who would submit the nomination and help with the campaign. Pete Rasey started his 1939 prom king campaign with a nomination by his friend Bill Gill, and after Rasey's won the election, the two of them attended the prom on a double date.²⁶ The increasing scale of these campaigns encompassed the large number of juniors who participated annually in these elections. In 1939, juniors at Wauwatosa cast 369 ballots for prom king, and in 1940, they cast 381 ballots.²⁷ At this time, there were twelve junior homerooms, meaning that each classroom had on average 32 students who voted in these elections. With this high level of participation, the campaigns and elections were significant parts of the prom's yearly rites for students.

²⁵ "Juniors' Choice For Prom King, Dudley Pflaum," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 12, 1937, 1.

²⁶ "Rasey Is Prom King," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 30, 1939, 1; "1939 Prom 75 Hours Away; Queen, King to Wear White," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 11, 1939, 1.

²⁷ "Rasey Is Prom King," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 30, 1939, 1; "Warren Elected Prom King," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 6, 1940, 1

Campaigns continued to grow in pitch during the 1940s as candidates sought to outdo each other with ever more sophisticated strategies. Juniors at Milwaukee's West Division High School expanded their campaigning in 1940 by drawing on the tactics of the seniors, who ran for class elections in the previous month and blanketed the school's available surfaces with campaign propaganda. The school's newspaper reported on the prom king campaigns, "Posters have been placed throughout the halls; blackboards have been used extensively to extol virtues of the various candidates, and signs pinned to students' clothing have proved an innovation."²⁸ The posters themselves were more sophisticated as some used photographs of the candidates for the first time.²⁹ Similarly, the Wauwatosa prom king election of 1941 saw students handing out cards, making massive signs, broadcasting statements over loudspeakers, and using the morning bulletins to advance their candidacy. Students sought new ways to advertise their candidacies and capture classmates' interest.

Coming up with these gimmicks and distributing publicity materials required increased levels of campaign organization, and during the 1940s, students engaged in earlier bouts of planning to marshal support for their candidacies. Wauwatosa's winning candidate of 1941, Dick Philipp, took the unprecedented measure of starting his campaign plans in the fall semester even though the election took place in the spring. He began by amassing a group of backers who contributed 10 cents each to a fund that eventually totaled over \$4.00.³⁰ That Philipp began organizing months in advance and was able to get forty of his classmates to contribute money to his candidacy speaks to how seriously students took these elections as well as to how much more spending money students had in the 1940s than in the previous decade. Philipp also selected another boy, Jack Haueter, to serve as his campaign manager in a formal elaboration of the partnership between nominator and candidate. Campaigns such as Philipp's expanded expectations for prom king candidates and an article in the following year reported several campaigns beginning weeks before the nomination process.³¹

At Milwaukee's West Division High School, nomination rules forced potential candidates to organize early. A nominating committee consisting of fellow juniors selected just one student for an official nomination, but any student who could get 50 juniors to sign a petition supporting their candidacies could also become a nominee.³² The purpose of having an official nomination was perhaps to ensure that each class had a president as well as a prom king, since this school linked those two positions together. While the committee members most likely made their choice with some consideration of their nominee's palatability to the adult administration, other students organized themselves into parties to provide their own alternatives. The 1940 prom king and junior class president, Tom Goss, was not the official nominee. Instead he was a member of the Yehudi party, whose Hebrew name suggests that students organized along ethnic lines. While some parties lasted from year to year, others popped up for only a year to run slates of candidates. Parties adopted symbols for publicity – the Jive Five party chose the image of phonograph records.³³ These elaborate planning efforts and concentration of energy illustrate how seriously students took these elections for prom king.

²⁸ "Committee Picks Louis Kuhfeldt – Five Others Enter Junior Presidential Race," *The Cardinal* (West Division), April 10, 1940, 1.

²⁹ "Juniors to Select Prom King Today," *The Comet* (West Division), March 19, 1941, 1.

³⁰ "Swimming Ace Rules Prom; Stupendous Campaign Wins," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 19, 1941, 2.

³¹ "Prom Committee Is Chosen; Campaigning Will Begin Soon," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 6, 1942, 1.

³² "Committee Picks Louis Kuhfeldt," *The Cardinal* (West Division), April 10, 1940, 1.

³³ "Juniors to Select Prom King Today," *The Comet* (West Division), March 19, 1941, 1.

This growth in publicity efforts and campaign organization drew on students' enthusiasm for managing their own activities. Students valued feeling ownership over the prom king elections. Yet the increased competitiveness of prom king elections also made them more visible to teachers and principals. Just as school officials began paying more attention to which students were becoming prom king, administrators also began to examine the campaign process more closely. These adults did see benefits to the elections as allowing students to practice making electoral decisions, but did not appreciate how the campaigns drew out rowdy behavior in students. Thus teachers and principals found themselves as willing partners insofar as the elections instilled democratic values in students, but they also sought to tamp down on students' more disruptive campaign methods. The strategies adopted by administrators thus all accepted as a given that students would campaign and hold elections but still attempted to manage student behavior. Students' responses to adults' various tactics revealed that the prom king campaigns were an important form of expression for them. They did not object to adults' attempts to limit the number of nominees, but they did not appreciate attempts to make the campaigns less festive. The campaigns seemed to students an opportunity to impose their culture on the school environment, and they resisted adult attempts to cut into that self-expression. What adults perceived as rowdiness, students perceived as autonomy and exuberance. School officials thus met with better results when they provided students a mutually acceptable avenue for expression.

As prom king contests at these schools grew more competitive, both students and administrators subjected election procedures to added scrutiny and found common ground in viewing these elections as an opportunity for students to practice democracy and adult responsibility. Students and teachers at Wauwatosa High School were careful to take precautions against illegal balloting in 1941, the year of Dick Philipp's aggressive campaign. "Each ballot was numbered by Barbara Hodgeson, Harry Holtz and Stan Chandler of the Prom committee to avoid 'stuffing' of the box, the returns were sent in sealed envelopes, and were counted by an unbiased group, representing the junior class, the faculty, and the *Cardinal News*."³⁴ At nearby South Division High School, where seniors voted in January for their prom king, the principal urged the senior class to "start thinking about your choice for prom king right now," in December 1948.³⁵ In touting the virtues of planning ahead for the election, the principal took the view that student participation in these elections was beneficial and honored student culture by taking the choice of prom king seriously. In 1947, as Wauwatosa teacher, Philip Regensdorf, was leading student members of the election committee in developing new rules for the prom king election, he declared to a junior assembly, "Juniors will be encouraged to follow democratic methods in selecting a worthy representative for so important a social event."³⁶ The call for new rules partly stemmed from confusion in the previous year when the winning king, Sievert, backed out and the school had to have two elections.³⁷ While Regensdorf may have been oblivious to the irony of stressing democratic methods in the election of a putative monarch, he again saw an opportunity in the prom king elections to inculcate responsible adult behavior and respect for order in this frenzied process.

Students accepted this language of responsibility and democracy as pertinent to seeing themselves as adult. A student editorial accepted that the class had a duty to manage the election

³⁴ "Juniors Elect Dick Philipp Prom King," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 19, 1941, 1.

³⁵ "June Classes To Elect Prom King," *The Cardinal* (South Division), December 10, 1948, 1.

³⁶ "Committee Sets Prom Date, Announces New Methods of Directing Campaign, Election," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 1.

³⁷ "Tosteson, Preston to Reign Over Junior Prom on May 11," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1946, 1.

responsibly: “Tosans have long maintained that they deserved the chance to hold election campaigns. The junior class of this year is going to get the first crack at proving this, and they had better do a good job.” In calling on classmates to live up to a higher standard of behavior, this statement must have struck a pleasing note for administrators while also appealing to students’ sense of their own maturity. The editorial understood that students’ campaign behavior was a source of perennial conflict with school officials. “The election of a Junior Prom King each year is invariably the most boisterous election in the school year. The students know this and try to keep it this way. The administration knows this and tries to stop it. And after every election both the students and the administration spend many, and often heated, words about the election.” As much as students enjoyed raucous campaign festivities, they understood that those activities detracted from their claims of preparing for democratic participation in the eyes of officials. While the editorial conceded that students should behave better and follow the rules, it also asserted the power of students by warning that the administration should not try to stop the campaigns because “students would never stand for such an attitude, and they shouldn’t. It isn’t fair to students to stop either their elections or their campaigning.”³⁸

Even though students acknowledged that they should conduct themselves more responsibly, they were defiant towards the possibility of ending the campaigns. As a result, Wauwatosa administrators eschewed taking a more punitive approach to the undesirable aspects of prom king campaigns, and they adopted a more conciliatory strategy to entice students into compliance. Administrators did not object to the existence of an annual election, but they were concerned that the unruliness of the campaigns detracted from the tradition’s benefits. In the postwar era, they established new policies that they hoped would rein in student behavior, while still allowing the continuation of prom king traditions. First, they attempted to lower the number of prom king candidates through nomination rules in order to reduce the number of campaigns. To forestall student rejection of these policies, teachers included students on election committees in a gesture to students’ ability to take on adult responsibilities. Second, the school set limits on the number and placement of posters for the campaigns, but this policy backfired as students skirted these rules through other forms of publicity. Finally, administrators sought to end a nascent tradition of holding a car parade in the school parking lot and offered students a mutually agreeable substitute. These prom king campaigns had been one of the greatest sources of conflict between the school administration and students, so to mitigate that tension, teachers and principals recognized that students wanted to be accorded respect through new policies that were a form of accommodation but not a retreat. Where administrators met with less success was when they tried to impose rules on students without considering students’ desires for respect and self-expression.

A key part of the adult administration’s strategy to restrain the feverish campaigning around the prom king elections was to include students in the process of devising new policies that would reduce the number of candidates. Before a junior class meeting in 1947, the class advisers made it known that they were “anxious to hear the ideas of the students on any other means of non-destructive campaigning.”³⁹ While students may have been more restrained in their expression due to this faculty oversight, the assembly did offer students some degree of participation in the process. In response, the student editors struck a conciliatory note with the suggestion that “perhaps the candidates and their committees should be made responsible for destructive campaigning by the threat of withdrawing the candidate who is advertised until the

³⁸ “Can Prom King Elections Have Pep Sans Damage?” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

eyesore is cleaned up.”⁴⁰ Students appreciated that the school administration was willing to work toward a mutually agreeable solution, and they did not object to changes in the nomination process even though those changes would reduce the number of campaigning candidates.

To become a candidate in 1947, new policies routed students through a teacher, Regensdorf, who distributed the nomination papers and thus might have served as a gatekeeper. Candidates had to gain ten signatures, and each student who signed for a nominee had to pledge to only support that one candidate. Students then held a formal primary on a Friday, with a run-off election on the following Monday. The run-off was frequently necessary because a candidate had to win a majority of the votes to secure the position of prom king.⁴¹ Fourteen boys ran for prom king in 1947.⁴² Eleven juniors ran the following year in what the newspaper continued to call “close and spirited” elections with an extended period of campaigning.⁴³ In 1949, the number of nominees was limited to ten.⁴⁴ This shrinking number of nominees was likely a strategy by the administration to cut down on the number of campaigns even as they were allowed to last for a greater span of time.

The school’s administration applauded students’ involvement in managing elections responsibly. In 1950, students passed a referendum that created a student council election commission though adults surely still had input. The commission’s first task was handling the prom king election, and the group consisted of “the vice president of the student council who acts as chairman, and one representative from each class, elected from the council at the beginning of each semester.”⁴⁵ Thus the commission gave management of the election process to a selected group of students whose student council involvement signified that they were likely in the habit of not opposing the school administration. The school’s editors from 1950 concluded, “From these portents of the future we feel safe in predicting that Tosa is well on the path away from the mismanaged farces which haunt us from out of the past.”⁴⁶ The editors appreciated that students were being trusted to manage the election responsibly; these elections were too important not to consider democratic values. With all of this publicity given to the election commission, the student newspaper had no remarks for the shrinking number of candidates in the 1950 prom king primary – only six candidates ran that year.⁴⁷

A decade later, in 1960, new rules further limited campaigning. While students were still able to nominate twelve students who were then “screened by a committee of students and teachers who will decide upon the final candidates,”⁴⁸ only the four candidates who survived the primary election were permitted to campaign with posters and given time to speak at a special junior assembly.⁴⁹ By limiting this primary to four candidates, the administration limited the amount of campaigning but continued to carve space for students to remain involved in the process.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Committee Sets Prom Date, Announces New Methods of Directing Campaign, Election,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 1.

⁴² “Bill Buechl Will Reign King Of Junior Prom on May 10,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 28 1947, 1.

⁴³ “11 Juniors Vie for Prom King Title in Election Monday,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 14, 1948, 1; and

“Jim Davis Selected King in Spirited Prom Voting,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 28, 1948, 1.

⁴⁴ “Plan Junior Prom; Date Set for May 7,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 2, 1949, 1.

⁴⁵ “Student Council Election Control to Be Tested in Prom Campaign,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 22, 1950, 1.

⁴⁶ “Praise for Juniors,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 2.

⁴⁷ “Jim Berner and Lee Herte To Preside Over May Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 1.

⁴⁸ “1960-61 Prom Campaign Rules,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 10, 1960, 1.

⁴⁹ “Haak, Heuer, Sedahely, Windau Selected Prom Candidates,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 29, 1961, 1.

Students did not show any resentment over the decreased number of candidates. In addition to being mollified through the inclusion of student representatives on the election commission, the decrease in the number of candidates did not detract from most students' experience in participating in the campaigns. Although fewer individual boys had the chance to run for prom king, the rest of the class still had the opportunity to support a candidate. In Wauwatosa's 1951 prom king election, which required more than one day of balloting, "practically every member of the junior class voiced his opinion with ninety-four per cent voting each day."⁵⁰ Students were accustomed to winnowing down the candidates, so these limits on the number of nominees was not a significant blow to widespread student participation. School officials were able to reduce the number of candidates without much resistance from students.

However, students did object to the administration's attempts to limit their self-expression. After banning campaigning entirely in 1945, perhaps out of consideration for the war,⁵¹ the school reopened campaigning the next year to find students chalking and painting around the school and "flying signs from the flagpole or the grille above the auditorium."⁵² In response to this unleashing of campaigns, teacher Regensdorf urged the junior assembly to consider methods for "controlled campaigning" for the 1947 election.⁵³ A student editorial recognized that the administration compromised in "allowing each candidate bulletin board space to put up posters" and not banning campaigning outright.⁵⁴ These posters and banners though represented an important expression of student enthusiasm for their culture, and students were not quick to heed these new regulations since posters were the most popular and traditional form of campaigning. Moreover, school officials did not seem too interested in policing these behaviors despite their issuance of new regulations.

Students continued to take extreme measures in hanging enormous banners and signs that were three feet high and emblazoned with their slogans, and the newspaper did not report on any repercussions for this disobedience. In 1949, the Wauwatosa student newspaper reported on the mysterious overnight disappearance of some 500 posters. Juniors had stayed after school to plaster the walls with campaign material, such as signs customized for their hanging locations – one sign over a drinking fountain said, "Don't be a drip, vote for Larry Elliott."⁵⁵ The scale of campaigns did not remain controlled, but the school's adult administration denied any involvement in the posters' removal. As a joke, the author of the piece, Connie Gerlach, concluded that the posters might have been blown away by a strong wind. She ascertained after speaking with Dr. William McGill, president of the school board, that "Tosa's polibureau gave no orders pertaining to the posters." Mr. Swancutt, the school's principal, confirmed that "there is nothing in the school rules to prevent putting signs on the school walls," a statement that demonstrates a reversal from the 1947 rules that limited students to posting on designated bulletin board space.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Gerlach checked with the janitors who claimed to know nothing. In these denials, school personnel indicated that although they had the power of

⁵⁰ "Wally Jensen and Peggy Ward to Reign Over Junior Prom Apr. 21," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa) April 11, 1951, 1.

⁵¹ "Junior Class Elects Tom Stouthamer as King of 1945 Prom," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 20, 1945, 1.

⁵² "Can Prom King Elections Have Pep Sans Damage?" *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 2.

⁵³ "Committee Sets Prom Date, Announces New Methods of Directing Campaign, Election," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 1.

⁵⁴ "Can Prom King Elections Have Pep Sans Damage?" *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 2.

⁵⁵ Connie Gerlach, "Wauwatosa Ponders Mystery of Disappearing Campaign Posters," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 13, 1949, 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

oversight, they were not interested in suppressing campaign activity, or at least did not want to risk being known as suppressing it. Thus students outdid themselves in the following year with 756 posters, 19 banners, and rubber mats stamped with campaign slogans placed through the school over the course of three days without incident.⁵⁷ Posters blanketed all wall surfaces.

After a decade of looking the other way when it came to campaign publicity, the school administration again decided to clamp down on poster usage in 1959. New regulations stipulated that each candidate “may have 75 posters to hang in a certain section assigned to him. Additional space for posters may be provided in classrooms with the consent of teachers.”⁵⁸ These sections were surfaces consisting of glass, tile, or lockers, which presumably could withstand being covered in adhesives. While candidates went along with the regulations and claimed that they approved of the new rules in interviews with the school paper, students did not all agree with these restrictions. One candidate, Dick Schoenke, went on record with his dissatisfaction that there were not “more good places to put posters.”⁵⁹ The next year, the number of allowed posters went from 75 to 60, and candidates now had to present all their posters for inspection in study hall before hanging them.⁶⁰ While earlier candidates surely exercised self-censorship with the knowledge that posters would be viewed by school officials, this new rule made that oversight more explicit and further circumscribed student expression. Additional rules in 1963 only gave candidates two days to display their campaign posters and required that candidates remove their posters after that period.⁶¹ School officials sought to restrict prom king campaigning and have greater control over visible forms of student expression.

These restrictions coincided with an expansion of student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In nearby Chicago, the Congress of Racial Equality had been active since its founding in 1941, yet even though students around the country were engaged in confronting administrators over civil rights issues, those protests were not at the forefront of student culture in Wauwatosa in the early 1960s. Still, the high school’s administrators might have been paying attention to the growth of student organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960, and been concerned about limiting student expression, even in a prom king election. Berkeley students would demonstrate against the university administration in 1964’s Free Speech Movement for their right to engage in political activity on campus alongside their freedom of speech. Albeit with lower stakes, the conflicts between Wauwatosa students and school officials over prom king campaigns heralded a new generation of students valuing and defending avenues for their self-expression. Students’ posters during the campaigns helped mark the school as their territory for a brief window of time; they transformed the hallways into a celebration of their culture. The visibility of those posters made that culture inescapable for anyone, older or younger, who walked through the building.

While these increased regulations were in place, posters soon became referred to as “traditional” campaigning, and students persisted in finding creative, yet permissible, ways to campaign. Candidates and their supporters engaged in more private campaigning outside of school to secure nominations. By 1962, students had brought the campaigns to their own houses: “beginning April 3, the little backers, each for his favorite candidate, have been talking to,

⁵⁷ “School Mice Discuss Prom Campaign, Amass Year’s Supply of Jellybeans,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 2.

⁵⁸ “Junior Class Candidates Consider Various Campaigns,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 2, 1959, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ “1960-61 Prom Campaign Rules,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), February 10, 1960, 1.

⁶¹ “Preparations for Prom, Post Prom Are In Progress,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 3, 1963, 1.

writing to and telephoning every possible source in ardor, trying to win enough votes for nomination.”⁶² Similarly, as the school restricted the number and placement of posters, students responded by finding new and permitted surfaces to emblazon with campaign slogans: their own clothing. Students at Milwaukee’s West Division High School had already promoted wearing pins in the 1940s, but in 1967, campaigners at Wauwatosa wore shirts dyed in colors that corresponded to their candidate for prom king.⁶³ By turning their own outfits into campaign propaganda, they demonstrated how important these elections were to them and created new visual displays. The next year’s students improved upon this by printing their colored shirts with “wild slogans” – “The pink boldly proclaimed, ‘You’re Voting Vance, Right?’ the blue declared that ‘Dick’s the One,’ the green told juniors to ‘Join the Teague League,’ and the white were stamped with ‘The Big ‘G’ Stands for Guller.’”⁶⁴ In adopting these shirts, students used their creativity to still campaign avidly but also to comply with the rules.

The Wauwatosa administration gained more student cooperation when it sought a compromise which channeled students’ desire for self-expression into a mutually acceptable form rather than trying to close it off. By far, the campaign tactic that garnered the most disapproval from school officials was the car parade, which emerged as an annual ritual in the postwar era. In 1946, Bob Sievert’s campaign added to the customary posters by also painting and decorating another boy’s car to advertise Sievert’s candidacy.⁶⁵ In following years, more students began involving cars in the election campaigns. Students took to driving to school before classes on the last day of campaigning before voting, as early as 7am, and arranged their cars in a parade around the school. In 1950, the week of prom king campaigning culminated “in a spectacular parade of cars”: “gaily decorated cars tooted merrily and madly distracted everyone within hearing distance.”⁶⁶ In a few years, the use of cars in campaigning had quickly expanded beyond an individual campaign tactic to a larger parade with mass participation and celebration by students. The excitement surrounding the car parades reflected the growing high school culture around cars, particularly among boys, and the role of cars in the campaigns reinforced the assignment of greater status and popularity to classmates with some wealth since parade participants needed access to a car.

While this new campaign development drew crowds of enthusiastic students, the editors of the school newspapers scolded that these car parades “marred” the nature of the campaigns. Despite general praise for classmates’ behavior during the election, they called the 1950 parade a “hazard created by the numerous vehicles which tore around the vicinity in reckless fashion.”⁶⁷ These editors were likely echoing comments made by school officials. By 1959, Wauwatosa’s administration banned parades, citing safety concerns. Since adult approval of campaigns stemmed from students’ responsible exercise of democracy, school officials could not condone this potentially dangerous activity as part of the prom king elections. Any candidate found to be engaging in “this device” would be “automatically disqualified.”⁶⁸ The students may not have

⁶² “Bugni Reigns Supreme,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 18, 1962, 1.

⁶³ “Bob Buchta, Jean Gessner Chosen Royalty To Reign Over Prom in ‘Enchanted Forest,’” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1967, 1.

⁶⁴ “Vance Baker, Helen Kuzma To Reign over Prom Festivities,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 1, 1968, 1.

⁶⁵ “Bob Sievert Victor In Ballot to Choose May 11 Prom Ruler,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 17, 1946, 1.

⁶⁶ “Jim Berner and Lee Herte To Preside Over May Prom,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 1; “School Mice Discuss Prom Campaign, Amass Year’s Supply of Jellybeans,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 2.

⁶⁷ “Praise for Juniors,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 26, 1950, 2.

⁶⁸ “Junior Class Candidates Consider Various Campaigns,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 2, 1959, 1.

been entirely subdued by this rule, for the school administration had to repeat this ban on car parades, with additional bans on outside campaigning and foot parades, in all-capital letters in the following year, 1960.

Despite banning these parades, Wauwatosa's principal and teachers were not entirely unsympathetic to students' desire for an outlet. The school offered students a compromise; when the administration banned the car parades, it began holding a junior pep assembly. The assembly would allow the administration to have more oversight of the occasion because the students were in an enclosed location, yet still permit students to participate in boisterous campaign activities. For the 1959 election, the school held an assembly where "each candidate for president will have a chance to put on a skit or give a speech in a 10-15 minute period allotted him in an assembly to be held on Dec. 8, from 12:00 to 1:00. Posters or slogans may be waved from audience at this time."⁶⁹ Instead of honking horns in car parades, candidates and their classmates expressed themselves through creative skits and cheers at the rally. In the early years of the assembly, students' skits were rather straightforward and did not always feature the candidate: "Bob Hipke's skit was the man-on-the-street type with an interviewer questioning typical Tosa students on their decision to vote for Bob Hipke for class president. John Kasdorf's skit was a take-off on 'Maverick,' and Dick Schoenke's an Edward R. Murrow skit in which Dick himself participated."⁷⁰ Each candidates' supporters had the opportunity thus to make their case in an entertaining fashion before "a noise-making contest in which the candidates had the cheerleaders lead cheers for the promotion of their campaigns." Although students were restricted from parading outdoors in their cars, the assembly did not reduce them to passive audience members; they were able to get up at the end of the cheering and parade on foot around the auditorium shouting for their respective candidates and waving signs. According to the student newspaper, teachers thought "the assembly was handled in a very fine manner and that it was a very constructive way of building up enthusiasm for the election."⁷¹ The assemblies both fulfilled students' craving for campaign festivities and adults' need to supervise those activities. Although the ban on car parades needed emphasis in the first couple years, students welcomed the assemblies as an acceptable substitute.

Subsequent junior class elections continued to feature the assembly, and the extent to which students embraced the opportunity to perform and campaign in this way was evident in their increasingly elaborate and imaginative skits and the direct participation of candidates themselves. In 1967, "the skits ranged from a jungle scene with Bob Buchta as Tarzan to an Indian reservation with Doug Berry to the rescue of an Indian princess in distress. A scientific laboratory was the setting for Mark Olinger's search for the perfect prom queen. Andy Cherones broke up a motorcycle gang with his tricycle and lollipop while Dave Wisland appeared amidst screaming girls, a-go-go dancers and Dan Delker on the guitar."⁷² With these more complicated plotlines, students remained engaged in self-expression and put great effort into their campaigns despite doing so under adult supervision.

In these postwar prom king campaigns, students sought ways to assert themselves in the school environment. The car parades were a noisy public spectacle that students created

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ "Kasdorf, Jenkins, Kress, Olson Elected Junior Class Officers," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), December 23, 1959, 1.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Bob Buchta, Jean Gessner Chosen Royalty To Reign Over Prom in 'Enchanted Forest,'" *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), May 3, 1967, 1.

independent of the school authorities. Campaign posters visually marked their inhabitation of school space. Students' youthful desires for autonomy within the controlled school setting found multiple means of expression in the prom king campaigns, but adult administrators perceived these boisterous activities as disruptive. Wauwatosa officials accepted the student tradition of prom king, but wanted to emphasize the responsibility that should come with elections and the value of restraint. Adults showed their disapproval of the more rowdy side of the campaigns by taking several approaches to deal with student behavior. They found more success when they were able to involve or divert students than when they directly restricted student expression. These adults recognized that they had to reckon with youth autonomy and sought to engage youth rather than punish them.

Although youth and adults in Milwaukee-area high schools clashed over the appropriate choice of prom king and the campaigns, few words were exchanged between them regarding the choice of prom queen. Student newspapers never reported any requirements for her grades or accomplishments. As the prom king tradition took root in the late 1920s, the king's prom date became known as the prom queen. While he often did not announce or make his choice until after the election, he was surely constrained by the expectations of his peers. After World War II, with new dating patterns that favored going steady, girls began to take more prominent places in the campaigns as the "running mates" of different king candidates. This change in the status of the queen seemed to emanate from students, for school administrations still did little to regulate the choice of queen, despite their increased oversight in the postwar era.

Some of adults' restraint might also be due to the more narrow role of the prom queen. The queen was a subordinate position and not associated with class office at any of the schools, though she could be added to the prom committee. While she had social clout in choosing members of the royal court at some schools, tradition also obliged her to choose the other prom king contenders or student government officers. The queen's role was not insignificant, but it was limited. Even when students began to run in king-queen pairs later in the century, queens remained somewhat dependent on their kings because it was solely boys' names on the nomination papers.

Gender norms were certainly at play in this privileging of male candidates. Ceding the choice of prom queen to the king mirrored the standard practice of boys asking girls for a date. Adult negligence in the choice of prom queen may also have been tied to their disinterest in challenging the prevailing gender norm. Students, while they were curious about who the queen would be, seemed content to elect kings without foreknowledge of the queen's identity prior to World War II. Numerous times up through the 1940s, male students won without having a clear choice for queen or without publicizing their choice during the election. For example, in announcing the 1933 election results at Wauwatosa High School, the school newspaper commented, "Those nominated for 'Kingship' were all very popular, but most of them already have a 'queen' while Bob [Haack]'s queen was just recently named – Mary Nagler."⁷³ Haack, the only candidate whose queen choice was unknown, won the election even though these other candidates had already chosen queens who were surely popular as well. In 1941, Dick Phillipp won the title without ever having "had a date and, therefore, his choice for Prom Queen is as yet

⁷³ "Haack Chooses Mary Nagler Queen; Juniors Enthusiastic Over Prom Plans," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 31, 1933, 1.

open to speculation.”⁷⁴ Students accepted the election of a king without any guarantee over who his queen would be.

Still, prior to World War II, students relished speculating who would be queen. Thus even though they did not demand to know her identity before voting, they did care about who she would be. Demonstrating the high level of interest among students, one student wrote in 1928, “They do say the big question will be who will be the prom queen.”⁷⁵ While selecting the queen was the king’s prerogative, gossip and rumors among students could not have failed to influence his choice. Students’ conjectures often took the form of jokes about girls angling to become prom queen. School newspapers poked light fun at girls’ calculations and ambitions yet those same jokes also acknowledged girls’ power to seek the queenship. A joke from 1928 started with a West Division student saying to a female classmate that he saw her sitting in a car with Bob last night and asking her if she and Bob are going steady. She responds, “Why no! He’s going to be Prom King next year.”⁷⁶ Girls faced a male-dominated prom king contest with their own behind-the-scenes plotting and planning. In 1941, another West Division student teased his female classmates, “If one notices a certain sprucing up among eligible junior girls, it can easily be traced to the fact that the prexy has not yet announced what girl will have the honor of being queen of the prom. Who can stop any girl from hoping?”⁷⁷ This type of good-natured ribbing managed to make fun of girls’ aspirations while also showing sympathy for them. With a number of prom king candidates unclaimed by a relationship, girls frequently saw opportunities to gain candidates’ attention and acquire the title of prom queen for themselves. Girls clearly did try to become prom queen, and they may have preferred to vote for an unattached candidate since that meant there was still a possibility for one of them to become queen.

The culmination of this curiosity was the announcement of the prom queen, which often merited a headline on the school newspaper’s front page, such as this one from 1931: “Prom King Chooses Gertrude Hasse for This Year’s Queen”⁷⁸ Later in the decade, students began publishing dual profiles of both king and queen. Because the queen had to respond more extensively to questions about what she would wear, she often received more column space than the king. While the rules specified that the king choose his queen, student speculation and female maneuvering surely influenced that choice and gave weight to that subordinate role. Adults seemed absent from this conversation.

A few girls were not content with the limited nature of the queenship, and entered the election to become prom queen in their own right. At West Division High School in the spring of 1941, Elaine Steiger was the first girl to run for junior class president. She was the candidate for the Confucius Party, and the newspaper commented that “if the Confucious [sic] party wins, the prom will have a queen who will choose the prom king.”⁷⁹ Another girl ran two years later in 1943 but neither met with success. The entrance of these girls into the previously all-male elections predated the efforts of women entering previously male-dominated occupations during WWII. That the West Division’s student newspaper, *The Comet*, did not report any uproar over the female candidates, and mentioned them matter-of-factly, spoke to the effects of longstanding coeducation in Wisconsin public schools. Presumably both girls had to meet the same academic

⁷⁴ “Swimming Ace Rules Prom; Stupendous Campaign Wins,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 19, 1941, 2.

⁷⁵ “Prom to be Dance Alone; Chairman Chosen,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 2, 1928, 1.

⁷⁶ “Jokes,” *The Comet* (West Division), January 1928, 33.

⁷⁷ “Junior Prexy to Wear Crown,” *The Comet* (West Division), April 2, 1941, 1.

⁷⁸ “Prom King Chooses Gertrude Hasse for This Year’s Queen,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 31, 1931, 1.

⁷⁹ “Juniors to Select Prom King Today,” *The Comet* (West Division), March 19, 1941, 1.

requirements for the office as male candidates, and both girls were known to be active in extracurricular activities. Still, the paper did acknowledge that these girls were attempting “to break old unwritten rules by running for junior class president and becoming prom queen.”⁸⁰ Despite girls’ presence in the classroom and participation in school life, they still did not have the same recognition as boys for leadership qualities. These girls would not have achieved the same type of athletic celebrity as boys, a status that was key to many candidacies, and the majority of students were content to uphold the tradition of electing a prom king rather than queen.

As students entered the postwar era, dating trends changed. As historian Beth Bailey has written, dating norms in the prewar period called for more dates with different people rather than steady relationships, which became more common after World War II.⁸¹ Whereas students used to measure popularity based on the number of different dates one had, students now bestowed approval on classmates who dated the same person. However, in the national media, adults showed a preference for the dating style of their generation and cautioned against going steady, urging students to consider the benefits of dating multiple people. Students though continued to seek out steady relationships and this change in youth’s dating patterns had implications for the election of prom royalty. Boys running for prom king were more likely to have queens already, and the language used in the school newspapers reveals that students now thought about voting for a couple rather than just a king. While queens were still not elected independently, they did gain prominence in the election as a partner.

A small sign that the queen role was growing in prominence was the codification of rules for her selection at Wauwatosa High School. Its junior class voted in 1946 for an addition to the election rules stipulating that the queen be someone from the junior class, as had mostly been tradition.⁸² The 1947 elections made each boy agree on the nomination papers that, “if elected, [he would] choose a junior girl as Prom Queen.”⁸³ These new rules received the endorsement of Mr. Regensdorf, the class advisor, yet they were clearly aimed at appeasing junior girls who wanted to ensure that the queen was a member of their class; even if the queen could only be one girl, that queen would at least be one of them. Faculty support for this measure echoed the policy adopted at nearby Shorewood High School in 1935 where teachers enforced a quota for prom; three-quarters of Shorewood’s junior girls had to receive invitations to the prom in order for the event to be held. These girls complained that their male classmates tended to invite girls from other schools or other grades. “It is impossible to ascertain the number of feminine tears shed because of failure to secure a Prom invitation, but Miss Lind [the Shorewood girls’ counselor] believes it is greater than is generally realized.”⁸⁴ In sympathizing with girls’ desires to gain entrance to the prom, Shorewood’s advisors recognized that the prom, under coeducation, should be inclusive for their female students as well as their male students despite dating norms which allowed boys to control access to the event. Lind’s attempts at inclusion were controversial with students, who were divided between appreciating her aims and being wary of any adult-imposed limits on the dating customs of their youth culture. However, at Wauwatosa, the new election requirement for queens promoted harmony between youth and adult concerns. At Wauwatosa, by

⁸⁰ “Junior Girl to Run for Class President,” *The Comet* (West Division), April 21, 1943, 3.

⁸¹ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 49-56.

⁸² “Bob Sievert Victor In Ballot to Choose May 11 Prom Ruler,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 17, 1946, 1.

⁸³ “Committee Sets Prom Date, Announces New Methods of Directing Campaign, Election,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 14, 1947, 1.

⁸⁴ “Shorewood Decrees Junior Prom Quota,” *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 12, 1935, 1.

enforcing this traditional requirement for queens, Regensdorf was accepting youth's extant culture while throwing his weight behind junior girls' claim to the throne and supporting giving greater significance to the queen position.

In the 1950s and 1960s, girls gained status as potential prom queens when students began to speak of male candidates as having female running mates. Students had long known whether any king candidates were dating particular girls, but now the newspaper portrayed them as being selected together. The Wauwatosa school newspaper in 1953 referred to the prom king candidates as being part of a couple: "Ron Sievert, Kathy Sillers Selected As Prom Royalty in Run-off Election" – Dave Leichtfuss and Barb Spicuzza were runners-up in run-off.⁸⁵ Even though the boys were the officially listed candidates, the article listed the girls as winning the election with them. In 1959, when the newspaper ran a profile of candidate Doug Williams, it also explicitly mentioned Sharon Haase as his "running mate," a suggestion that they were more of a team even though the profile focused on Williams. At this time, Wauwatosa had begun holding pep assemblies with campaign skits, and Haase also participated in Williams' skit based on "This is Your Life."⁸⁶ This new phrase seems attributable to the increased prevalence of going steady – fewer boys would run without a known queen and students were more likely to associate candidates with their girlfriend. Every newspaper profile of the 1962 prom king candidates running in 1962 declared who their queen would be, except one.

As the sixties wore on, a 1965 article referred to the royal court as including the "other candidates for prom king and queen," as if the girls were candidates along with their male counterparts.⁸⁷ One skit at Wauwatosa that year also saw students playing with traditional gender roles. Prom king candidate Tom Easton acted the part of "Cinderelski," while his friend Pete Vollmer donned a drag costume for "a comely fairy god mother" and Easton's running mate, Karen Mortenson, played Prince Charming. In the skit's climax, instead of presenting a glass slipper for Easton to try on, Mortenson placed a heavy combat boot on his foot in a probable allusion to the war in Vietnam.⁸⁸ By substituting a combat boot for the traditional dainty slipper, and by replacing the feminine -ella suffix with the ethnic -ski, a nod to the sizable Polish immigrant population in Milwaukee, the skit maintains and emphasizes Easton's masculinity. Yet having Mortenson play the prince, a male suitor who pursues the heroine, and dressing Vollmer in drag suggests that these students were comfortable with women in positions of power and more fluid gender roles. While Easton was the candidate and the main character, Mortenson was integral to the skit's narrative and got to select her mate. In these postwar decades, the position of prom queen became more central to the process of selecting the prom king; even though girls were still not elected individually, they were more active players in the campaigns.

Although the competition to become prom king remained a male-dominated field, the role of queen took on more visibility in the postwar era and gave girls more of a chance to participate in the campaign and election process. This rise of the prom queen's role was largely facilitated by students, rather than adults who gave little direction as to the selection of the queen. Although students and educators had strong views of how the prom king represented a particular conception of adulthood, they exchanged few words about the desirable traits of the queen perhaps because both groups had gendered notions of success and leadership. As a queen,

⁸⁵ "Ron Sievert, Kathy Sillers Selected As Prom Royalty in Run-off Election," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), March 25, 1953, 1.

⁸⁶ "Camelot's Candidates," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 18, 1962, 1.

⁸⁷ "King Tom and Queen Karen Reign Over Prom on May 1," *Cardinal News* (Wauwatosa), April 14, 1965, 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

girls were in a subordinate role, though they did have some power, and boys' choices for prom queen were not a deciding factor in the earlier prom king elections from the 1920s to early 1940s. After WWII, however, student newspapers portrayed potential queens more as partners in the campaign. Girls who became queen also received attention in profiles that promoted them as school celebrities. While the position of queen still relied heavily on the prom king candidate, it allowed girls to take a more public part in the process and gain recognition.

Students and adults struggled to impose their definitions of adulthood on the prom king contests. As much as students yearned for adulthood, they betrayed their youth. Students stressed the social ease and popularity that they tied to their hopes for upward mobility, and they valued the autonomy and self-expression allowed to adults. They celebrated the prom king elections as stretching the excitement of prom beyond a single evening of dancing, and the elections elicited outpourings of youthful exuberance. When administrators began paying more attention to the prom king elections in the postwar period, they sought to tame students' spirit by marrying it to responsibility. While school officials ultimately had the power to ban these prom king campaigns, they instead experimented with less disciplinary methods such as vesting students with election commission duties or channeling student expression into a more controlled environment. This more accommodating attitude was part of a larger shift among adults in the postwar period toward attempting to guide student behavior while still honoring student culture, and the ways that adults outside of the school embraced this more permissive attitude will be the focus of the next chapter.

Adult Authority and Accommodation

Even though the prom largely reflected student culture, adults also sought to influence that culture. But in order to have that influence, many recognized that they would have to relate to youth and win students over. Thus magazines such as *Seventeen* empathized with young female readers who eagerly anticipated the prom. In a November 1949 article, Bryna Ivens wrote, “You’re told it’s a shortened form of ‘promenade,’ but you suspect it must be short for ‘promise,’ too: a promise of one of the most delightful events of your entire life.” She went on to note that with such high expectations, girls were bound to face some “worrisome moments ahead over what to wear, what flowers (if any) you’ll get, where to go afterward, what time to come home.” Ivens tried to illustrate that she understood the importance of prom and how the event magnified youth’s everyday anxieties about dating: “Not that these anxieties don’t exist at other times and around other dates. But the prom is special. And its problems are in proportion.”¹

This article is illustrative of how the popular press tried to respond to students’ concerns and is one component in a larger effort by adults to address students and the prom. Adults in the postwar period were far from challenging prom, but rather acknowledged its significance and sought to guide students within the prom’s parameters. This attitude mirrored the stance of teachers in the postwar period, as discussed in the previous chapter at Milwaukee high schools. National periodicals for educators, such as *Clearing House* and the *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, had surprisingly few mentions of prom, but promoted a tolerant and sympathetic attitude toward students. This approach was also prevalent in the wider community among magazine editors with their advice columns and articles, men’s clubs seeking to keep young drivers off the streets after prom, and advertisers seeking to promote consumption of their goods. Amid rampant postwar fears of juvenile delinquency, these adults sought to reach out to youth, rather than alienate them, by exercising a gentle authority.

Advice columns exemplified this approach. *Senior Scholastic* featured an advice column where Gay Head answered questions from high school students. Historian Beth Bailey has noted that the column was the most popular feature of the magazine among students.² However, since Head repeated some questions and answers in her columns over the years, it is unclear whether these were instances where she received the same question and decided to reprint her previous answer or if these recurrences call into doubt the authenticity of students’ requests for advice. Despite these difficulties, these advice columns are revealing on several fronts. First, youth enjoyed the column whether or not their letters were actually featured, and their faithful reading of the column suggests that they valued adult advice to navigate their experience in such events as the prom. Second, youth felt that prom was linked to adulthood and these advice columns allowed them to consult an actual adult. They saw adult writers as arbiters about formal etiquette, but also about behavior in social situations. Finally, the adults writing such columns had to contend with youth culture and try to appeal to the youth as a reasonable adult, friendly to young people’s interests but still possessed of some authority. Gay Head was sometimes conflicted in this, as were other writers – she tried to promote more realistic expectations and encourage youth

¹ Bryna Ivens, “Problems of the Prom,” *Seventeen*, November 1949, 82.

² Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Backseat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 30.

to be less concerned with popularity. Yet, she wanted to support students in their hopes and their desires to be well-liked.

Gay Head began annually devoting an entire column to several prom-related questions beginning in 1948. Prom was unique in that it was the only school event to warrant a column to itself. In the mid-1960s, she reverted to answering prom questions sporadically rather than giving over a full column to the event. The duration of Head's prom column for nearly two decades shows her perception of when prom was preeminent in student social life and displays a peak in popular awareness of high school proms in the postwar period. *Seventeen* began publication in 1944 and also frequently ran articles about prom in years following World War II. However, *Seventeen* also halted prom stories in the mid-1960s and only began having prom-specific articles again in the early 1970s. In both publications, authors tried to instill youthful readers with a certain moral sense around dating. Much of the advice is very optimistic – conveying the sense that youth have the best intentions, and advising them to treat each other with respect. Articles in these magazines reveal not only how editors and writers were aware and sympathetic to prom as an important event in young people's lives, but also how these adults expected or hoped these events were received by youth. These etiquette columns were a main way adults tried to communicate some adult standards of behavior to students.

Rather than dictating rules and regulations, these adults engaged in a softer form of authority in communicating with students. Teachers sought to persuade students to behave well rather than impose strict discipline. As a further example, local men's clubs in Wisconsin, concerned over the safety of students driving to Chicago to celebrate prom, began offering a post-prom entertainment. The carrot, rather than the stick, was their strategy. The success of this approach is seen in the large crowds of students who chose to attend these post-prom events. Another side of this approach was the promotion of consumption by magazines and advertisers. Magazine editors also sought to promote consumption as part of their business' reliance on advertisers. Companies seeking to profit from youth also adopted the prom as a feature in their advertisements. They sought to trade on the prom's appeal to secure patronage from teens and recognized youth's value as customers, both now and in the future. They were not able to tell youth what to do, but offered strong suggestions. If the prom was a student-initiated rite of passage, adults made sure youth could turn to adults as guides.

Rather than dismissing youth's concerns about the prom, adults illustrated their sympathy for students by demonstrating their own enthusiasm for the prom. In doing so, magazine writers participated in and helped perpetuate youth prom culture by issuing statements that cast the prom in positive language. These writers could also draw on their own experience, for as white-collar adults in the postwar era, they would have been in high school after proms were established as a common rite. These adults spoke highly of the prom and its significance as they tried to relate to teen readers.

Magazine articles extolled the prom and portrayed it in glowing terms. Gay Head, in *Senior Scholastic*, often took this tack in her short introductions to her annual prom columns. In a typical example from April 1959, she wrote, "Take a bright cloud of music and you have the setting. Take a warm night in spring and you have the season. Take two people with happy jumping hearts and you have the reason why. It's the dance that crowns them all – the prom." She also acknowledged the thought and energy young people put into preparing for the prom, "You've had the date circled for weeks, and already there's been more speculation and secret maneuvering involved than most skilled diplomats use to launch a major conference. Rumor has

it that this year's prom will be the best ever."³ Head implicitly gave her approval to such effort by proclaiming the prom would be superlative. While she seems to have patterned this language after her ideas of what students felt about the prom, these words also had the potential to stoke students' expectations for the prom. Rhetorically building up the prom was common in her columns and in other articles for youth. In her last column to deal exclusively with prom questions in 1963, she wrote, "Whether your spring dance is a semiformal affair in a gaily camouflaged gymnasium or a tux-and-gown occasion in a big ballroom, it's still the event of the season."⁴ *Seventeen* similarly had written in 1955, "A prom is a magical moment ... shining, special, and set apart from ordinary life, ... a fabulous storybook ball where pomp and pageantry crown a whirling weekend of fun."⁵ This language reinforced students' own rhetoric; even as Head and other writers parroted the excitement that students felt for the prom, their articles also contributed to that excitement. With this writing, adults attempted to position themselves as sympathetic to their young audience.

For many adults who wrote for teens in the postwar era, prom would already have been a fixture in high schools when they themselves were teens, so they could personally sympathize with students' experience. In fact, writers for this audience seemed to remain self-conscious about their proms: "in an informal poll of *Seventeen* staff-members, less than half could boast attendance at their high school proms. Not all of these cherished the memories either." Despite the low attendance rate of *Seventeen*'s staff, prom remained a potent symbol of their high school years, and their experiences had stayed with them for better or worse. "All those who hadn't prom-trotted (with one interesting exception) remembered vividly how they had grieved about it. Several made up for their high school disappointments by shining at every college prom."⁶ These writers in the postwar period then had firsthand experience with proms and were able to draw on their own memories of prom's importance to give greater weight to how students might get wrapped up in proms. Ironically, even though these adults acknowledged that prom rarely lived up to their idealizations, they still hoped to make up for past regrets by helping postwar youth plan prom experiences that would satisfy those same outsized expectations.

With this empathy, these adults demonstrated admiration and respect as they described students and proms. They showcased different ideas students had for prom themes in articles such as "Prom Report USA" in *Seventeen* in 1962. For this piece, the magazine "interviewed prom chairmen, questioned prom-goers, priced decorations and snooped behind the scenes of 147 proms to find out: what makes a prom great? What are the best refreshments, the most popular themes? What's new in fun and fanfare?"⁷ These writers consulted students as authorities and positioned themselves as merely the collectors of this information. Articles such as this one portrayed proms as impressive achievements: "In Phoenix, Arizona, one high school took over part of a resort and held its prom in candlelit cabanas around a pool floating with orchids flown from Hawaii (all paid for by money from Junior class sales)." The report stressed the craftsmanship of another school's students in creating a "giant clam shell bandstand (made of chicken wire and paper napkins – 25,000 of them! – spray-painted gold)" for a sea-themed prom. In such descriptions of high school proms, magazine writers showed how they valued teenagers' efforts.

³ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 10, 1959, 28.

⁴ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 17, 1963, 42.

⁵ "Prom Weekend [Spring Hop at Pennsylvania Military College]," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 110.

⁶ Bryna Ivens, "Problems of the Prom," *Seventeen*, November 1949, 82.

⁷ "Prom Report USA," *Seventeen*, April 1962, 154.

Part of adults' respect for proms seemed due to their approval of the planning and execution required of students in carrying out these events. Writers endorsed such responsible behavior by urging students that such an important occasion deserved proper planning. *Seventeen* advised, "When something important comes along, something so out-of-the-ordinary and as long-looked-forward-to as a really big spring prom, it is merely common sense to buckle down and do your finger exercises well in advance."⁸ *Scholastic's* Gay Head wrote, "If it's an important dance, you want it to be a special occasion – and a special date – so do some planning in advance. And why keep the girl on pins and needles? She may have a better use for them in whipping up a new dress or remodeling one."⁹ That adults imbued the prom with values of responsibility and courtesy further explains their acceptance and enthusiasm for the prom. To these ends, writers offered their assistance and advice. *Seventeen's* prom report continued, "To help you, we have pages and pages of gossipy details, tips, recipes and decorating how-to's for the most wonderful prom in the world. Yours."¹⁰ Numerous articles gave suggestions about how to choose a prom theme or how to organize a dinner party after prom. Part of adults' endorsement of the prom in the press was tied to how the prom promoted these responsible behaviors.

Adults further honored the prom as a rite of passage as their rhetoric about the prom reflected youths' desire for a transformative experience. Popular magazines addressed girls particularly and wrote optimistically about how the prom could illustrate their development into women. One article in *Seventeen* stated, "Each time you drive through the night to dance to a band that pulses out through the darkness – on that night, there exists the wonderful, attractive possibility of change. Change for the new, the better, the beautiful."¹¹ For girls, magazine writers assumed the goal of such transformation was to be noticed by the opposite sex, and they encouraged girls that "each time you go to a party and think about it seriously and plan for it, you're taking a step toward maturity. You'll sense it – he'll see it."¹² Adults thereby linked such events as the prom to growing up, just as developing an interest in the opposite sex was a part of puberty. *Scholastic's* Head also put forward this potential for transformation as she described a boy's thoughts in picking up his date, "It was the same Mary who'd looked so cute in the skirt and sweater this afternoon, but this Mary was different. In her evening dress, she looked just, just – 'Gee, Mary, you look beautiful,' Jim said aloud, and Mary smiled happily."¹³ While most of the emphasis was on girls' changes, Head also described Mary thinking that "Jim looked so handsome in his dinner jacket and he'd been so nice to her parents." Despite greater attention to girls' transformation, it was also noted that boys underwent changes as they donned their formalwear. The language used by adults around these transformations reflected a wider view of the prom as a rite of passage.

The adults writing for these magazines illustrated their empathy for youth by emphasizing that they too valued the prom and viewed it with enthusiasm. These articles are notable in that adults tried to embody youth's excitement for the prom, but also used that sentiment as evidence of how they could relate to youth. Still, writers were aware that, even as they enthused about prom, many students did not automatically feel confident about their

⁸ Stuart E. Sheedy, "How to Enjoy a Prom," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 136.

⁹ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, November 21, 1958, 48.

¹⁰ "Prom Report USA," *Seventeen*, April 1962, 154.

¹¹ "You By Starlight," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 115.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, May 11, 1960, 36.

upcoming prom experience and these adults attempted to put the event in perspective for their readers.

The notion of transformation in adults' writings also spoke to students' anxieties about themselves – adult writers understood that young people often felt awkward or were dissatisfied with their current selves and would yearn to transform themselves into more effectively composed adults. These insecurities and desire for change help explain why young readers turned to adults, either by reading the magazines put out by adults for advice or posing questions to the magazines themselves. Adult writers sought to address students' anxieties ranging from practical questions about how to behave at a formal event to broader questions about handling social interactions involving attraction and vulnerability. In giving this advice, writers sought to portray themselves as sympathetic, yet even as they treated these concerns with understanding, they interjected their adult perspectives. This approach further exemplifies how adults attempted to accommodate youth while still infusing their commentary with calls for responsibility and consideration.

A number of articles were simply about how foreign such a formal event was to students. During the postwar period, not only were more students from different class backgrounds attending high school, but American society was also involved in a longer-term process of growing informality. The prom however represented an instance in which formality reigned. Something as simple as bringing a date to the prom venue could lead to worries and self-doubt: “Do I drop my date off at the school door, and then go park the car? Or do I take her with me while I park and let her walk back from the parking lot with me?”¹⁴ The customs were unfamiliar to students. Even though the prom had emerged from a student culture, students had also enshrined the prom with customs they felt fitting for a more formal and more adult event. In the postwar period, youth could receive advice from adults about proper etiquette in popular magazines.

A frequent source of anxiety was the corsage. Boys were not expected to know much about flowers, which were more within the feminine domain according to gender roles, so magazines dealt with this issue often. Most depictions of boys' worries regarding corsages were about what their dates would like and how much to spend. Columnists advised boys to simply ask their date about her tastes or her dress. Both *Scholastic* and *Seventeen* emphasized that corsages did not need to be enormous or expensive. They advised boys to err on the side of moderation, reassuring them that, “Girls do not like (and cannot wear) a horseshoe of roses; often they prefer a single flower such as a gardenia or a camellia.”¹⁵ Boys also experienced awkwardness over whether to pin the corsage to his date himself or to hand the corsage to the girl's mother.¹⁶ That boys might be nervous about pinning the corsage near girls' breasts was so obvious as not to require comment.

Not only were boys uncertain about which flowers would please their dates, but girls were also unsure how to communicate their preferences to their dates. Even without prompting by students, adults writing about the prom anticipated that corsages would be a point of confusion. A male writer for *Seventeen* suggested to girls, “You can always mention to your escort, in a natural way, that you're wearing pink, and hope that he will remember – even if he hasn't remembered to ask you what color.” However, he also reminded them to be gracious if

¹⁴ Gay Head, “Talking It Over,” *Senior Scholastic*, October 14, 1964, 30.

¹⁵ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, March 28, 1951, 18.

¹⁶ “Prom Problems,” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 45.

their date was ignorant about flowers, and chastised any girls who might insist upon receiving expensive corsages: “One thing you ought to understand is that the more he spends on a corsage, the less he can spend on other things.”¹⁷

Adding to the confusion was the variation of corsage customs by schools. While it was traditional at many schools for boys to purchase corsages, some schools either banned corsages or provided corsages for all the girls in order to prevent wealthier students from flaunting their flowers. As noted in Chapter Three, many of these rules arose during the Great Depression but remained in place after World War II. Gay Head advised boys to inquire about the local practice.¹⁸ Adults’ advice surrounding the corsage was largely about demystifying the process, how to communicate with the opposite sex, and being satisfied with what one had.

For female readers, what to do with their gloves and evening bags was another common topic of advice. Properly managing these accessories required knowing a specific set of customs. Whereas gloves had been a mainstay of fashion earlier in the twentieth century, they were no longer *de rigueur* in everyday apparel. However, etiquette continued to call for gloves at formal events such as the prom, and adults perceived the need for instruction. *Seventeen* informed readers that short gloves “must come off for eating and drinking,” but long ones did not need to be removed for casual eating if a girl could “unbutton them and tuck the hand part into the wrist opening.”¹⁹ However, girls should remove all gloves at a dinner before the dance. As late as 1963, an excerpt from *The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining* still offered advice about wearing gloves.²⁰ This excerpt in the year’s May issue focused entirely on appropriate conduct at a prom. *Seventeen* and *Scholastic* also counseled girls about how to hold their evening bags. A clutch was best held in one’s left hand while dancing, but a purse with a wrist strap, as preferred by *Seventeen*, was held in the right hand so it would not bang against a dancing partner.²¹ Gay Head warned girls not to “load your date down with *your* belongings” but to carry their own purses.²² These advice columns suggested a recognition among adults that these accessories were now uncommon for girls and demonstrated a desire to comfort girls who felt confusion. But they also served to prepare girls for a future of adult socializing in which these older customs might linger.

Similarly, the receiving line that was customary at prom was not a feature at other school dances, and columns advised students on how to greet the different people in the line. Both *Seventeen* and *Scholastic* emphasized the ease of moving through the line. For students who were nervous about having to make small talk with adult chaperones, both magazines comforted them by explaining that stopping to chat would hold up the line so students should feel confident about only exchanging quick greetings.²³ Unlike their treatment of corsages and accessories, adults felt the need to add a justification for the existence of the receiving line amid their advice for any youth who did not see a reason to observe the line. Gay Head wrote, “The receiving line is usually made up of the ... folks who have given their time and energy to help make *your* dance successful. ... Once you’ve paid your respects, you can waltz off on the right foot for a

¹⁷ Stuart E. Sheedy, “How to Enjoy a Prom,” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 192.

¹⁸ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, March 28, 1951, 18.

¹⁹ “Prom Problems,” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 45.

²⁰ Enid A. Haupt, “The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 28.

²¹ “Prom Problems,” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 45; Enid A. Haupt, “The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 28.

²² Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1962, 30.

²³ Enid A. Haupt, “The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 28.

wonderful evening.”²⁴ Head demonstrated understanding for students’ anxiety about the line, but hoped that this appeal to students’ appreciation for the prom would convince them to overcome their nerves and conduct themselves properly.

These columns were not just about procedure but also about comforting students who felt prom introduced a number of foreign customs. Writers for these magazines perceived that the prom was too complicated for students to navigate on their own and offered explanations of how to handle corsages, gloves, evening bags, and the receiving line. Concern was significant enough that Coronet Films felt there would be a market among teachers for a “highly realistic” film showing “the behavior of two young couples, whose correct etiquette and proper conduct serve as models for the high school audience.”²⁵ Students could turn to adults for help in demystifying these procedures, and one way that youth may have tied prom to adulthood was that adults were a source of help in understanding these rules of prom behavior. Youth also may have preferred to consult a magazine rather than risk appearing ignorant by asking a peer, and thus found the adult voice soothing as these writers sought to bolster their readers’ confidence in their ability to handle these social situations. These adults’ concern about the corsage may have reflected their memories of their confusion at their own proms, but they also conveyed sympathy for youth’s current bewilderment at prom’s formal customs.

These desires to learn the proper etiquette for proms were really an extension of youth’s larger anxiety about fitting in. Adults further showed their willingness to take youth seriously when their magazines confronted youth’s uncertainty in interacting with their peers. Adults struggled to strike the right note between instructing youth about how to treat others respectfully and also expressing their understanding for the pressures of popularity. Students who chose to read these articles found writers addressing fears about fitting in or being accepted, so youth could gain adult advice about how to relate to their peers. Adults mostly urged students to be themselves, but did not belittle their anxieties.

Concerns about popularity were among the most common themes of letters published by these magazines. Articles and columns sought to address students’ insecurities about comparing themselves to peers who were more popular. But even as writers accepted how important popularity was to their teen readers, they used short stories and advice columns to question what popularity represented and to encourage their readers to be happy with who they were.

Many of the short stories featured in *Seventeen* and *Scholastic* were quite moralistic regarding norms of behavior for youth. While some short stories were written by young women themselves and expressed their hopes, adults had the editorial power to choose which stories to publish and thus which messages to send to their readers. These stories delivered a clear message that students ought not change who they are in the search for popularity. One short story, “Reflection of Luanne,” told the cautionary tale of Marty, a nerdy girl, who stops performing well in school when she began to copy the popular Luanne in order to become popular herself. Rather than feeling competitive or jealous, Luanne takes Marty under her wing and helps Marty find a popular boyfriend, but his interest soon wanes. Now that Luanne’s parents have decided to send her to private school, she tells Marty: “You’ll have to take over for me here at school. ... You can be cheer leader and prom queen and everything.”²⁶ To be a cheerleader and prom queen were the accepted signposts of popularity that Marty had aspired to. But when Marty tries to

²⁴ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 17, 1963, 42.

²⁵ Coronet Film Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, January 24, 1958, 3T.

²⁶ Marjorie Holmes, “Reflection of Luanne,” *Senior Scholastic*, September 28, 1949, 21. This same story had previously been published in *Seventeen*’s March 1949 issue.

offer her makeover services and befriend nerdy classmate Janet, Marty learns that her boyfriend prefers girls who are nerdy and has begun dating Janet who rebuffs Marty's offer. The story implies that Marty should have been true to her strengths just like Janet and that the title of prom queen was cold comfort for losing her boyfriend. Yet this story's message about popularity is somewhat more complicated. Marty's boyfriend was desirable in large part because of his popularity, so the story suggests that students should accept that there are those who are naturally popular. Yet Marty should not make herself over in order to seek popularity, but rather be like Janet and win over a popular boy by acting herself.

Another story published by *Scholastic* rewarded its heroine who remained true to herself but the reward was a prom date with a popular boy. In "Prettiest Girl at the Dance," by Elsie Gould Smith, the heroine Gail vested prom with importance and recognized her own outsider status at school, "Of all the dances, the Prom was the one she hadn't expected to go to. She had hoped to go to the others, but hadn't been asked. Everyone knew that if you went to the Prom, you were in and that was dreamy, and if you didn't go, you were out and that was horrible. She'd got used to being out." She had accepted who she was and her status. However, her brother's camp counselor, Stan, was a senior in her chemistry class and he asked her to the prom. Stan was a popular boy who was friendly with the most popular girl in the junior class. Gail and her mother are excited about Gail going to the the prom, and Gail is nervous, "The girls she knew didn't go to proms, and she was in awe of the girls who did. They were so sure of themselves."²⁷ Her friends did not take it well that she was going to the prom, where Gail had a marvelous time. While the story emphasized that Gail had not changed at all in order to achieve this stunning social success, it still embraced the notion of popularity. Both of these stories emphasize that girls could get what they wanted by being themselves; accepting themselves could lead to being better-liked.

In her advice column, Gay Head sympathized with students' hopes for popularity. She showed she was not immune to the excitement of a girl wondering "whether Mr. Big will ask you to the Junior Prom?"²⁸ Head identified the standard qualifications for popularity in her answer to a girl who asked how to date lots of boys, "Almost everyone has the same mental picture of Jane Jones, Popular Girl. She's elected class secretary; she's the prettiest girl in school; she's always with a boy and has dates every weekend. Now think. How many girls do you know who are *really* this way?"²⁹ While Head could readily concoct this ideal girl and thus spoke to youth's worldview, she also questioned whether this was an illusory model. In pushing girls to let themselves off the hook, she tried to alleviate the pressure of seeking popularity while still offering advice on how to socialize with boys. Head encouraged girls to patronize school dances and the drugstore and to show a genuine interest in boys' interests. She offered them an alternative perspective; readers should value friendliness, rather than strive for popularity.

Similarly she advised students to eschew popularity when it conflicted with what they wanted for themselves. To a girl who worried about what her friends would think of her going to prom with a nerdy, less popular boy, Head advised her not to mock her date with her friends but to talk him up enthusiastically: "Guess who asked me to the Prom? Jeff Ward! That keen fellow in trig ... asked me out of a clear blue sky ... been dying to know him!" Head emphasized that the girl should not feel the need to conform to her friends' cattier ideas of popularity, and that attempts to flirt with other boys at the dance and broadcast her availability while there with

²⁷ Elsie Gould Smith, "Prettiest Girl at the Dance," *Senior Scholastic*, April 25, 1956, 19.

²⁸ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, February 1, 1957, 26.

²⁹ Gay Head, "Talking It Over," *Senior Scholastic*, October 4, 1963, 52.

Jefferson were nowhere near as good a strategy as being enthusiastic about him. Head concluded, "If you give Jeff the attention a prom partner deserves, we have a hunch the other boys will look at Jeff and wonder, 'What's he got that I haven't got?' And if you give Jeff's interest in you a chance to percolate, they may look twice at you and wonder, 'What's she got that I didn't notice before?'"³⁰ Her point was not that the girl should not think about her status in other boys' eyes, but that the girl should rethink what behavior would appeal to other boys. Head still acknowledged that there might be other boys with a preferable social status, but she also urged her reader not to succumb to peer pressure. *Seventeen* echoed this sentiment, writing that no matter how popular or unpopular a girl's prom date is, she ought to pay him full attention, "Every second you spend eyeing your secret crush is wasted. It will annoy (and hurt) your escort to see your attention wandering around the room. He'll begin to be obviously miserable, ...[and] your dream man decides there must be something wrong with you to make your date look so unhappy!"³¹ Head gave more pointed advice to a similar letter writer who asked about how to respond to friends who called her boyfriend a sissy. Head was emphatic that she should stand up to her friends, and one strategy would be that "you might point out (tactfully), that Julie wasn't among the beauties of the Prom Queen's Court, but that you think she's swell anyhow."³² While underlining that being Prom Queen or on the court was a high social status, Head also reminds students that they should not base their friendships on such status. This advice also recommended that students adjust their expectations to be realistic about their social status and to think about how others feel. For turnabout dances where girls ask boys, Gay Head instructed a girl to invite the boy who takes her out rather than the crush she has never spoken to. She explained, "You know what *you* think of the boys who sit in your living room on week-nights and then invite another girl to the Big Prom."³³ The advice implies that while students have big dreams for social success at the prom, they should consider who they actually relate to rather than their fantasy of attending the dance with a more popular student.

Often, the advice contained in these magazines was about confidence. Head offered encouragement to a senior boy who has never asked a date to a dance and now wanted to ask someone to the Prom. She wrote, "Musten your courage and do the thing you want to do: Ask her to go to the Prom! Because you're a senior, you have more 'prestige' and poise than a younger boy, and even though you're not convinced of it – you can carry off the asking for the date with skill."³⁴ The girl may say no, but Head still told the boy to try and get to know her better. Head took these insecurities seriously and sought to build the boy's confidence in himself.

Students also feared rejection for being bad dancers. For a boy who worried that a girl would not want to attend a dance with him because he was a poor dancer, Gay Head wrote, "Look at it this way: Would Rhonda rather be with a good dancer or with a boy whose company she really enjoys? If you have a feeling that Rhonda wants you to ask her, don't let her down. Get hold of your courage, get ride of your doubts, and ask her."³⁵ While she urged him to also maybe ask a friend for help or get dancing lessons, she first focused on building up his confidence. For girls who were embarrassed about not knowing dance steps, Head advised, "You can't dance a certain number? Admit you can't Charleston and ask if he'd rather sit this one out.

³⁰ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, October 13, 1948, 36.

³¹ "Your Evening Dress and How to Wear It," *Seventeen*, November 1946, 136.

³² Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, December 1, 1948, 26.

³³ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, February 2, 1948, 30.

³⁴ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 25, 1951, 24.

³⁵ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1958, 28.

If he wants to teach you, be an enthusiastic pupil – even if you’re a clumsy one.”³⁶ She was convinced that enthusiasm and confidence were what students needed, and while they might be able to build that confidence through dance lessons, it was those feelings that mattered.

Stuart Sheedy in *Seventeen* concurred, “Boys are attracted by confidence as much as – often more than – by beauty. If you radiate a friendly and happy kind of self-assurance, they will be drawn to you without knowing why.”³⁷ The advice extended not just from building one’s own confidence but also about instilling it in others. *Seventeen*’s Stuart Sheedy advised girls how to compliment a guy, to tell him “he looks like a million dollars (even if \$500,000 would be more accurate), so that he will feel it was worth all the trouble. Furthermore, if he isn’t a hardened veteran of many a prom, he may be a little unsure of himself.”³⁸ While students reading this may have felt this advice was overly wholesome or cheesy, the adults writing these columns sought to be sympathetic.

Similarly, writers for these magazines generally advised students to be inclusive of others rather than be exclusive or cliquish. A boy wrote to ask Gay Head whether he could ask a girl to dance if she was talking to another girl. Head answered that he could ask her to dance if he could also get a friend to dance with the other girl.³⁹ This scenario was about knowing proper behavior, but the etiquette inculcated was about not stranding the other girl and about making her feel included in the dance. A girl also asked how to respond to a boy who has asked her to dance when she does not want to. Head responded that for a less important dance, she should not embarrass him with a refusal, but at a more important dance, she may refuse him politely, but then has to sit out the whole dance and not dance with someone else.⁴⁰ Although Head treated the issue as one of etiquette, she also suggested that students rethink their attitudes about who was or was not a pleasant dance partner.

This attitude towards inclusiveness among adult writers supports Beth Bailey’s analysis of changing dating customs after World War II. Adults writing these columns would likely have experienced the system of rating and dating which emphasized having numerous different dates to establish one’s popularity whereas youth after World War II were more interested in going steady. Adults then seem to have maintained some of their attitudes from their dating experience. One letter to Gay Head in 1957 asked, “My best friend has a crush on a boy who likes me and who I’m sure is going to ask me to the Christmas Prom. I like him just as a friend and know I’d have fun with him, but I don’t want to hurt my girl friend. What should I tell him?” Head responded that the girl should accept the date because her refusal will not guarantee that he will then ask her friend. The only reason not to accept would be if she thought she would be leading him on because “a prom is an important date.”⁴¹ In a sense, she was telling the girl not to take dating so seriously and to avoid hurting the boy’s feelings, but she was also suggesting that the girl should keep an open mind. Head also warned students against being too exclusive as a couple, and to mingle more among their classmates at a prom. In 1958, Gay Head urges a girl not to dance all the dances with her date, as if it were a “desert island,” but to arrange trades with other girls and their dates: “Of course your date should get most of your attention, but not your

³⁶ Enid A. Haupt, “The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 28.

³⁷ Stuart E. Sheedy, “How to Enjoy a Prom,” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 192.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 17, 1963, 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, December 6, 1957, 30.

undivided-every-minute-from-eight-to-midnight attention. You'll both enjoy yourselves more if you circulate and share the evening with friends."⁴²

A similar holdover in attitudes existed in adults' advice to girls regarding gender roles. Even as adults urged students not to conform to ideas of popularity, adults expected girls to adhere to traditional gender roles. *Seventeen* in particular told girls to behave in a feminine manner. One article titled "How Hard Can You Try" approvingly gave the example of Mary who has previously had a hard time resisting chocolate sodas and snacking, but when she "got a bid to a prep-school prom two months in advance," she "didn't look at a piece of candy or a gooey dessert" for sixty days.⁴³ *Seventeen* thus believed female readers ought to watch their figures in order to be attractive.

More pointed was a series of cartoons published with the title, "How Not to Get Another Prom Bid." Each panel of the cartoon featured a woman doing something unfeminine or inappropriate. For example, one showed a woman dancing with her date, but waving over his shoulder to three other men who eyed her eagerly, with the caption, "'Eye all the stags; ignore your date / (When he deserts you, call it Fate)." The cartoon clearly sought to portray such behavior as rude and having a negative consequence, even though the girl evidently had plenty of suitors even if her date decided he had enough of her impropriety. Another illustration was of a girl with glasses and a book in front of a grimacing male onlooker with the caption "Big books and words denote a brain / All beaux will fear to date again."⁴⁴ This cartoon reinforced the idea that girls should not publicize their intelligence. Yet another depicted a girl in a full skirt, kicking up her leg, and a man disdainfully turning his nose up at her. The caption read, "Wave both your arms and shout whoopee / Then watch the startled stagline flee." While the point of the cartoon was that flamboyant behavior was inappropriate, it also suggested that women needed to stifle their exuberance around men in order to be feminine. Since adult women were also receiving such messages about how to be feminine, it is not surprising that they relayed similar messages to girl readers.

Another reinforcement of gender roles occurred in advice that put girls on a pedestal. To a girl who wondered whether to thank a boy after they have finished dancing, Head wrote that it was appropriate only if she asked him in the first place.⁴⁵ *Seventeen* advised more specifically that girls need not thank a boy for a dance because it was his privilege to dance with her, "but you should tell him, each time, that you enjoyed it."⁴⁶ This advice suggests the balancing act that was expected of girls in this period. This question of thanking boys also came up in terms of intimacy. *Seventeen* advised a girl who worried about what to do after a first date at the prom once "he has said his usual thank-you.... What I mean is, he'll probably say, 'What about a kiss?' ... The boy would think a girl owes it to him, wouldn't he? And if he did, what would I do?"⁴⁷ *Seventeen* answered that she should not feel she owes him a kiss, but should express that you have enjoyed her time with him, "Simply tell him that to you, a kiss means a great deal, and that it's a question not of how long or how well you have known him, but of how deeply you feel. But at the same time, be sure to emphasize the fact that you do like him." This advice was about an admittedly tame situation when other students might be considering higher levels of

⁴² Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1958, 28.

⁴³ Alice Beaton, "How Hard Can You Try," *Seventeen*, September 1945, 33.

⁴⁴ "How not to get another prom bid," *Seventeen*, April 1946, 124.

⁴⁵ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 17, 1963, 42.

⁴⁶ "Prom Problems," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

intimacy, and this illustrates that adults at these magazines preferred to consider youth as chaste and also placed moral authority in girls. Both examples of advice seemed to elevate girls to a cherished position in society.

Perhaps because of these strict gender roles, girls struggled with how to ask boys to the prom. Advice was never given to girls about how to ask male classmates to the prom, but it was considered appropriate for a girl to ask a boy from out of town to her school's prom. In 1958, when faced with this query of asking a boy from another city to a prom, Gay Head responded positively, but added that "when you have an out-of-town guest, you're not only his date, but his hostess, too, and you will have to do a little more planning than if Jake were a member of your own class."⁴⁸ Because the girl could be cast as a hostess, she could still be fulfilling her gender role even as she paid for the tickets and made the plans for the evening. The boy might offer to pay for a meal in a restaurant and the corsage, presumably to maintain his masculine role. In 1966, a similar letter asked whether the girl should pay for the evening when she invited a boy, and Head emphasized that the girl should pay for items that she can in advance, but otherwise give cash to her date to maintain the fiction that he is paying and not have to ask her for money.⁴⁹ While these instances were exceptions to the usual male initiation of a date, they still found other ways to conform to the gender norms of the time.

When disappointment regarding the prom did confront a student, he or she could turn to these magazines for words of comfort. Adult writers sought to lend a sympathetic ear to readers when their prom plans did not work out, but also wanted to convey their adult perspective that the prom faded in importance over time. One boy's letter to Gay Head asked, "What can you do if you ask the girl you've been dating to the Spring Prom and she tells you she has already accepted another fellow's invitation? I've been considering taking her girl friend. What do you think?" Head offered a supportive response for the boys' hurt feelings, "You don't know that your girl friend likes her dance date better than she does you. He asked her first, remember?"⁵⁰ She aimed to boost his confidence and illustrated her understanding of how significant the prom was to these youth.

Seventeen ran several articles aimed at girls who had not been asked to the prom. In its first year, the magazine titled one piece, "So you weren't asked to the prom." The author Helen Aronson encouraged girls to shrug it off, but conveyed sensitivity to the difficulty that might pose for girls. She suggested gathering with other girls who were not attending the dance and to talk about it until they tired of the topic. Despite the difficulty of overcoming such disappointment, Aronson sought to put it in perspective, "Sure a Junior Prom is important," but she wrote that learning to deal with disappointment was the "most significant signpost in growing up."⁵¹ These writers walked a fine line between informing these girls that the prom is less significant in the long run, but also in sympathizing with their hopes in this moment. A later article, "Problems of the Prom," which inventoried all the necessary tasks of getting ready for prom, wrote sympathetically, "To the girl who doesn't have a date for the prom or much prospect of one, the other troubles seem trivial (which they are not) or, at least, secondary (which they certainly are). No doubt about it, if you don't have The Date, you can't fret about The Dress." This author, Bryna Ivens, tried to comfort these girls by stressing that they were not alone, saying, "It seems that more girls don't get to go to proms than do. For one metropolitan high

⁴⁸ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1958, 28.

⁴⁹ Gay Head, "Talking It Over," *Senior Scholastic*, February 11, 1966, 28.

⁵⁰ Gay Head, "Talking It Over," *Senior Scholastic*, March 20, 1964, 42.

⁵¹ Helen Aronson, "So you weren't asked to the prom," *Seventeen*, December 1944, 24.

school, the number in the class who attended a recent prom was put as low as twenty-five per cent. Which would mean that seventy-five per cent of the girls probably stayed home with heartaches.”⁵² Again, this author is sympathetic but appeals to statistics to try to make the girls feel less alone.

In the many different pieces of advice in these magazines, adults attempted to illustrate their understanding of youth’s anxieties. This determination to relate to youth demonstrates how adults accepted the prom’s importance in students’ lives. Yet writers also sought for their readers to benefit from an adult perspective which placed less importance on popularity and more on confidence and happiness.

Adults at these magazines also thought youth would appreciate advice about dealing with their parents at prom time. With prom being a special event, students often hoped to negotiate staying out later or driving privileges. While articles sympathized with students who chafed against parents’ rules for prom night, these magazines urged youth to act responsibly and talk with their parents rather than rebel. They tried to convince youth not to get caught up in desires to stay out late, but to find ways to enjoy themselves within the reasonable confines of their parents’ expectations. They then hoped that students would make responsible choices themselves.

Gay Head attempted to humanize parents in her responses. To a query in 1962 from a boy whose friends’ parents would not let them stay out late, Head replied, “Your parents know the prom is a big night. They also know they want you to return safely sometime before morning.” Head emphasized that they can still have fun without staying out all night, and offered an analogy, “It’s like saying the girl who can spend \$100 for her prom dress is automatically going to look five times prettier than the girl who is on a limited budget and can spend only \$20 for her dress.” She expected that the students had a good idea of what their parents would approve or disapprove and encouraged them to use that knowledge in devising their plan for the night. She also was optimistic that if “you discuss proposed plans with your parents in an intelligent way, you may be surprised at how game they’ll be to go along with your fun.”⁵³ Head suggested that students and parents could talk and reason with each other to reach mutually agreeable prom plans. Her advice placed students in a position of more power than simply obeying parents. Head recommended that students still have a chaperone if they plan a party afterward, but she also wanted them to have a hand in planning their fun. *Seventeen* advised teens whose parents would not let them stay out that they should see if their parents would allow them to gather for snacks at someone’s house after the prom. The article suggested, “Pooled fun at the home of a friend with parents who tolerate the din is often more enjoyable and less expensive than going out with your date alone.”⁵⁴ This advice emphasized the importance of students’ maintaining positive relationships with their parents, and that students who met their parents halfway by putting forward a responsible plan had more likelihood of their parents meeting them halfway.

Even though Head championed having a good relationship with one’s parents, she also firmly believed that the prom was an activity for youth, and not a place for parents. One student wrote to ask, “I don’t have a car. Do you think my date would mind if I asked my parents to drive us to the prom?” Head responded in the negative, “Most proms mean meeting friends, dancing until everyone feels like leaving, going somewhere for a snack, then maybe stopping at a friend’s house, then going home – late. It’s a pretty spontaneous evening which can rarely be tied

⁵² Bryna Ivens, “Problems of the Prom,” *Seventeen*, November 1949, 82.

⁵³ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1962, 30.

⁵⁴ Enid A. Haupt, “The Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Entertaining,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 28.

down to an on-the-minute schedule.”⁵⁵ She suggested that he ask a friend with a car to drive them instead of asking a parent to give up an evening to play chauffeur. This solution would not only be considerate of his parents’ time, so they would not have to wait around, but would also likely lead to his having more fun as he and his friends would be more independent, just like adults. While these magazines suggested ways to improve students’ prom experience by negotiating privileges with their parents, they also understood that the prom was for youth. Youth could turn to these articles for advice from adults about dealing with other adults, their parents.

While prom overtook columns and issues of youth magazines, articles about prom were infrequent and sporadic in professional publications aimed at teachers and principals. Even though prom was the highlight of the year in students’ eyes, it was just one concern among many for educators. The publishers of *Seventeen* knew that every year brought a fresh cohort of students desiring content about the prom, whereas career periodicals addressed teachers who often remained at their institution for years. Although teachers and principals could not have read much information about proms in their own periodicals, they would have been familiar with the material reaching youth’s hands. Teachers were the primary distributors of *Senior Scholastic* to students and each issue came with special teachers’ guides that suggested activities for students. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published capsule reviews of novels for young adults in their bulletins. In a typical review, the book, *Sixteen Is Special*, received praise for depicting “exactly what goes on in the high-school crowd ... with a keen ear for their conversation” as it told the story of a girl’s prom experience.⁵⁶ Although publications such as *The Clearing House*, a magazine about secondary education with content contributed by teachers, and the *NASSP Bulletin* did not devote many articles to the prom specifically, the two periodicals did show educators sharing the sympathetic attitude toward students that was prevalent among writers for youth during the postwar era.

Many educators had long been sympathetic to the plight of youth, yet teachers perceived a difference in the new generation’s experiences at school. It was already a well-established custom to have student dances at schools, but faculty members commented on an increase in the pace of student social life after World War II. A Tucson teacher observed the heightened frequency of student events, “Student social life in a modern school presents a striking contrast to that offered pupils a generation ago.... Quite different is the social program in the modern high school, which more often than not schedules at least one weekly social event.”⁵⁷ Educators’ acceptance of this increased social activity was undoubtedly shaped by the growth in attention to psychology and concerns about juvenile delinquency in the postwar years. In a 1952 analysis of social activities, the *NASSP Bulletin* remarked, “Gregariousness ... and the development of attraction for the opposite sex [are] basic drives of adolescent years [that] make social acceptance a basic emotional need. Being a member of the in-group – belonging – maintains the young person’s self-esteem.”⁵⁸ The piece went on to note the increase in juvenile court cases and cited disruptions to family life caused by the war. Teachers expressed a desire to understand rather than criticize changes in youth culture. In a 1969 article titled, “A Look at Adolescent Music,” author Allen H. Frerichs, a professor of secondary education at Northern Illinois University,

⁵⁵ Gay Head, “Boy Dates Girl,” *Senior Scholastic*, December 6, 1957, 30.

⁵⁶ Review of *Sixteen Is Special*, *NASSP Bulletin*, 1954, 145.

⁵⁷ Calanthe M. Brazelton, “Tucson High Offers Pupils a Busy Social Life,” *Clearing House*, December 1945, 233.

⁵⁸ Nellie Zetta Thompson, “Chapter XI : Social Activities,” *NASSP Bulletin*, February 1952, 113.

sought to demystify the music popular with youth for his fellow teachers. “To adults it is a great deal of noise and undefined lyrics, but the music is not the fearsome monster that many ascribe it to be. It is not destroying the morals and cultural appreciation of youth.”⁵⁹ These publications emphasized the importance of teachers not judging students despite being occasionally befuddled by the younger generation.

This instinct to understand youth was accompanied by concern for how best to guide them and gain their cooperation. High schools had already experimented with empowering student governments, which ideally would have “full authority for many matters,” yet postwar articles stressed that adults needed to set limits on student councils through such means as giving the principal veto power.⁶⁰ Students thus felt included in decisions about their school, but adults still influenced the process. With regard to prom, *The Clearing House* and the *NASSP Bulletin* offered insights into teachers’ attempts to guide student behavior around etiquette lessons, chaperoning, alcohol, and post-prom activities. The advice of these magazines echoed the approach taken by Milwaukee teachers in handling students’ exuberance in prom king contests; teachers there honored students’ campaign traditions but channeled student energies away from rowdiness into acceptable forms of expression. These publications’ recommendations involved showing respect for students but still leading students toward responsible behavior.

Teachers were pleased that the prom offered a chance to train students in proper behavior. As one teacher wrote, “If students do not learn to read very well, we are somewhat consoled by our awareness that they are ... becoming familiar with social amenities at the Junior Prom.”⁶¹ Furthermore, as described in Chapter Two, students themselves desired this knowledge as they associated adulthood with preparing for social mobility. Teachers thus eagerly capitalized on students’ interest in etiquette. Walter E. Scott, a principal at a Massachusetts high school, observed, “From questions students asked, both in home-room discussions and in private, it was apparent that many felt insecure in their knowledge of manners.”⁶² Teachers were sympathetic to students’ feeling that the niceties of prom were alien to their everyday lives. According to New Jersey’s Assistant Commissioner of Education and Supervisor of Secondary Education, H. H. Ryan, “Most students have no occasion to receive instruction at home in the conventions appropriate to that kind of social affair.”⁶³ At many schools, teachers were involved in developing prom etiquette programs. A Wisconsin teacher shared information about the success of their etiquette lessons, saying, “Because students are aware of the right and wrong thing in prom etiquette, they are much more careful of their actions at the prom. As a result, we have had more successful proms.”⁶⁴ Like magazines aimed at youth, teachers’ magazines primarily looked to ease students’ anxieties in providing information about proper behavior. While educators certainly favored the grooming of a better-behaved student population, they mainly expressed concern for youth.

Students’ training in etiquette seemed to bear fruit as chaperons’ biggest complaint was of boredom. The few articles about chaperoning in *The Clearing House* and the *NASSP Bulletin* described it as a chore; none featured strong complaints about student behavior. One teacher, Carrol C. Hall, the pen name for a teacher in a large Midwestern high school, satirized the

⁵⁹ Allen H. Frerichs, “A Look at Adolescent Music,” *Clearing House*, March 1969, 435.

⁶⁰ William S. Sterner, “Areas of Student Authority: Why the Council Can’t Run the School,” *Clearing House*, March 1954, 402.

⁶¹ Robert H. Snow, “Plain Talk about Schools,” *Clearing House*, September 1963, 6.

⁶² Walter E. Scott, “A Courtesy Program,” *NASSP Bulletin*, December 1947, 98.

⁶³ H.H. Ryan, “Imperative Need Number 8,” *NASSP Bulletin*, March 1947, 109.

⁶⁴ Christine Pedersen, “Prom Etiquette Program,” *NASSP Bulletin*, November 1946, 90.

experience of the chaperon as feeling unappreciated. “Certainly no chaperon ever receives the consideration that most sophomore youths give to their choice of dates to the affair. If the teacher is weak enough to succumb to the invitation, . . . he or she *is in* for an evening of studied, formal neglect.”⁶⁵ Hall did not describe any resentment from students, and active policing of students did not seem necessary even in his mocking the duty of the chaperon. Despite Hall’s sarcasm, he mostly seemed to feel superfluous and to find little misconduct.

Alcohol was the gravest concern of chaperons at the dance. In a 1953 article titled “Some Fundamentals of Discipline,” the *NASSP Bulletin* dispensed the following admonishment to teachers who were overly sympathetic to students: “Sometimes a firm, frustrating *No* has more meaning than a conciliating *Yes*. When pupils want a prom where liquor is sold, they must be told *No!* There are limits to adolescent desires.”⁶⁶ While alcohol was where school administrations drew the line, many of their efforts to combat alcohol drew from the same tactic of winning over and involving students. Toward the end of World War II, *The Clearing House* published an article by a teacher from Galva, Illinois. After couples were caught sneaking out of a high school dance and returning with alcohol on their breath, students on the student council worried that the misbehavior of a few students would lead to a total ban on student activities. The council received encouragement from its faculty adviser to draft a series of recommendations to deal with alcohol consumption by students, and the faculty then adopted these recommendations. The article concluded, “When pupils feel that their school’s reputation is important, when their own opinions count, when they have a voice in the administration, things happen for the mutual benefit of all.”⁶⁷ Numerous articles in both publications talked about alcohol education programs. One national program, Allied Youth, involved students in creating school organizations for “alcohol education and alcohol-free recreation.” The author praised it for being “an organization that knows youth – that speaks youth’s language – that wins youth’s interest.”⁶⁸ All these efforts at alcohol education were not entirely successful, however, since a 1973 article acknowledged that intoxicated students at the Junior Prom was part of the “ordinary life of a school.”⁶⁹ Yet even though school administrators were willing to draw a firm line on alcohol, educators still recognized the value in including youth in conversations about preventing alcohol at dances.

Teachers and principals were not just concerned with students’ behavior at the dance, but also with their behavior afterward. In 1948, Sidney Gould, a teacher at Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, New York, bemoaned how his students would show up to prom and then shortly desert the dance for nightclubs in the city. To remedy this situation and to keep students under responsible adult supervision, he urged parents to join teachers in planning a prom that would be “socially and educationally viable.” In his mind, the solution was to make the prom more appealing; his interest was in upholding an older generation’s understanding of prom tradition. “The elimination of the senior prom from high-school life would be unthinkable, if only for the reason that parents look upon it as the ‘coming-out’ party for their children.”⁷⁰ The existence of an adult generation with its own conceptions of the prom experience meant that schools would not consider canceling prom but instead focused on how to revitalize the prom so

⁶⁵ Carrol C. Hall, “High-School Chaperon,” *Clearing House*, January 1950, 302.

⁶⁶ Charles A. Tonsor, “Some Fundamentals of Discipline,” *NASSP Bulletin*, March 1953, 146.

⁶⁷ C. A. Webber, “A Council Acts: Petting and Drinking at School Parties Led to Council Recommendations Adopted by Board,” *Clearing House*, February 1944,

⁶⁸ Gerald M. van Pool, “Chapter X : The School and Other Youth Serving Agencies,” *NASSP Bulletin*, February 1952, 95.

⁶⁹ Lena M. DiCicco and Hilma Unterberger, “Does Alcohol Follow Drugs?” *NASSP Bulletin*, April 1973, 89.

⁷⁰ Sidney C. Gould, “Senior Prom: Costly, Exclusive, Deserted,” *Clearing House*, February 1948, 340.

it could retain students better. Frank Sisk, a high school teacher in Wapello, Iowa, wrote in 1954 that Iowa juniors and seniors also left their proms early. He was quick to deny any alcohol consumption, “There was no moral issue at stake at our school, as students went in groups of about six or eight to a car, and there has never been any evidence of drinking. They merely wanted to see who could travel the greatest distance before coming home the next morning.”⁷¹ Teachers offered up ideas such as holding a prom queen contest at the prom to get students to stay later. Schools would also turn to the wider community to persuade students to stay at their proms. Sisk described the coalescence of community members for organizing a post-prom entertainment, “As their plans were formulated and made known, parents, townspeople, and merchants asked to be allowed to help.” With this approach, teachers recognized the power that students held and sought to entertain students’ desires for nightlife within an adult-managed environment, again redirecting youth toward acceptable avenues.

Thus adults in the community also demonstrated their desire to accommodate youth by volunteering for these post-prom parties. Various men’s clubs particularly took the lead in this effort in a number of Midwestern cities. In Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin, concerns over students driving down to Chicago for entertainment after their proms motivated the local Lions and Rotary Clubs to hold events after their local high schools’ proms in the 1950s.⁷² The previous year, Racine had organized a youth group to plan a safe-driving campaign and work with the city’s safety council.⁷³ This youth group illustrates how adults already felt they needed to win over youth to engage them on the issue of safe driving. The article describes the campaign as a cooperation between adults and youth, adding that “prominent [students] will be interviewed during future conferences, home games” to promote safe driving and they will try to show the movie, “Last Date,” which warned against the consequences of driving too fast, in either local theaters or high school assemblies.⁷⁴ Although school newspaper articles did not mention anything more specifically and teachers such as Sisk denied it, one can surmise that these programs were not merely about driving but about students driving under the influence of alcohol. Business leaders who made up these clubs’ memberships may have been motivated by parental concern, but they also had a stake in cultivating loyalty among students and keeping students’ entertainment dollars in their own cities.

The post-prom was a focus for this safe driving campaign and drew the attention of cities to the dancing needs of youth. For several decades already, adults involved in civic organizations had held dances for youth. As discussed in Chapter Two, the involvement of adults in holding city-wide dances appears to have gathered force in the late 1930s and early 1940s in places around the nation with recreational dances in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and all-high school dances organized by the PTA in San Francisco. During the 1950s, adults, particularly in the Milwaukee area, began to turn their attention to providing promgoers with a post-prom party that would be under adult supervision. South Division High School in Milwaukee was the first in the city to have a post-prom party in 1950. The South Side Lions club partnered with a local business, the Allen-Bradley company, to hold it in the company’s clubrooms. Admission was separate from

⁷¹ Frank Sisk, “Greater Holding Power for the Big Prom: Something Better than Dancing,” *Clearing House*, May 1954, 545.

⁷² “Park Seniors Plan Post Prom At Memorial Hall in June,” *Park Beacon* (Park High School), April 10, 1953, 1.

⁷³ “Racine Youth Inc. Plans Safe-Driving Campaign; To Work with City Safety Council on Program,” *Park Beacon* (Park High School), December 5, 1952, 1.

⁷⁴ “Last Date” is viewable here: http://www.archive.org/details/last_date

the prom but designed to be affordable: “Dancing, free cokes, professional entertainment, and a turkey dinner will be offered at a pocket-book pleasing \$1.80 per couple.”⁷⁵ The school newspaper noted the couples heading to the post-prom would receive a motorcycle escort, presumably to keep a watchful eye on teens’ driving. Kenosha, Wisconsin, had a Kiwanis Club sponsoring a post-prom by 1953 with students going to see a movie premiere at the Kenosha Theater with lights and photographers set up outside, dancing at the Eagles Club which was decorated as a night club for the evening and would feature a floor show from Chicago.⁷⁶ Racine’s Rotary Club began a long tradition of sponsoring a post-prom party for the town’s two high schools, Park and Horlick in 1953. In keeping with concerns about student driving, “The Rotarians are going to be at the high schools at 11:30 p.m., with cars ready and waiting for those who desire transportation, and they’re planning to be just chauffeurs, no more, no less.”⁷⁷ The Rotarians wanted to demonstrate that they were there to provide students with safety and fun, not with overbearing supervision. That first post-prom entertained students with a “super-de luxe wing-ding, complete with turkey and ham dinner, all the fixings, all the coke, pop, milk or coffee they can drink – prizes, special prizes, and, at a dawn breakfast, the piece de resistance, the awarding of grand prizes.”⁷⁸

Adults in these clubs did not just want to provide students with a safe environment but also wanted them to enjoy themselves. Milwaukee’s South Division High School newspaper emphasized that the Lions Club would make “King Robert Gember and Queen Victoria Schwerin and the court of honor... special guests” at their post-prom.⁷⁹ Elevating the prom king and queen at the post-prom illustrates how the adults sought to respect the traditions of high school youth. The Racine student newspaper wrote of the teamwork occurring between students and club members, “Co-chairmen for the Park prom are John Graham and June Strohmer who, with their committee and Mr. Jack Larsen, are working in cooperation with Horlick students and the Rotarians.”⁸⁰ Similarly, students worked with professionals from Western Printing to decorate the post-prom space in Memorial Hall. These adults recognized that they needed to consult students in order to design an event that students would enjoy attending.

National magazines began covering this trend of overnight proms in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Life* featured an overnight prom in 1958, saying, “To keep them happy and off the roads and ultimately wear them out, many high schools now sponsor all-night dances. The only trouble is that each generation seems to take longer to wear out.”⁸¹ The overnight prom at Mariemont High School near Cincinnati lasted almost 32 hours, combining a dinner, formal dance, riverboat cruise, breakfast, an afternoon at an amusement park, and another dance. In 1960, *Seventeen* wrote about a “choo-choo prom” in Arlington, Illinois, that was started in 1958. This prom was even more elaborate, with the prom costing \$23 a couple compared with the Racine prom’s \$5, but still, the article claimed this train-themed prom was “half of what an average after-prom fling along Chicago’s Loop used to cost.” Again, parents were looking to keep students away from going to a bigger city for entertainment after their proms. Despite the high level of parental involvement in planning and executing this event, the article emphasized

⁷⁵ “Stop! Here’s Exciting News for all South Prom-Goers,” *Cardinal* (South Division), May 12, 1950, 1.

⁷⁶ Letter to the Editor, *Park Beacon* (Park High School), April 17, 1953, 2.

⁷⁷ Lucy Colbert, “So You Think You’ve Seen a Big Party? Rotary’s Post-Prom Affair Bids for Honors,” *Racine Journal-Times*, May 20, 1953, 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “Stop! Here’s Exciting News for all South Prom-Goers,” *Cardinal* (South Division), May 12, 1950, 1.

⁸⁰ “Park Seniors Plan Post Prom At Memorial Hall in June,” *Park Beacon* (Park High School), April 10, 1953, 1.

⁸¹ “Prom went on and on,” *Life*, June 9 1958, 145-6.

that parents were careful to stay out of the teens' way: "Parents hire the train, take care of all the details, then quietly fade into the background. (Only parents in sight: thirty mothers helping in the dressing room; thirty fathers in the dining car cafes, game-booths.)."⁸² The train took students to a campsite where they ate breakfast and participated in activities during the day. In its first year, 800 students attended the train prom, and last year had 1,000 students in attendance, making the prom train a great success. *Seventeen* followed up this article with a larger report in 1962, "All-night proms sponsored by town and parent groups flowered all over the country – with midnight suppers, breakfasts, swimming parties, picnics and disk-jockey shows. In one California school after the prom everyone moved out to the floodlit school terrace for a record party till dawn."⁸³

In designing these post-proms, adults sought to guide youth's behavior away from seeking entertainment in large cities and toward staying in a safe hometown environment. They recognized that they needed to offer the youth some entertainment that would compete with the lures of the city. The small business owners who comprised many of these clubs may have also had a more self-interested motive, one of cultivating students and their parents as customers and keeping the money that teens would spend in their town rather than in the big city. While the height of this post-prom trend seemed to be the 1950s and early 1960s, Racine has continued to hold post-proms to this day. Even though attendance has fluctuated in accordance with changing student attitudes, the community is very proud of its event. Such adult involvement in holding an event for students allowed students to feel affirmation from adults, in that adults feel students warrant such effort and consult students in their planning. Yet the prominence of adults in this high school tradition also emphasizes students' youth in contrast to the adults involved, which speaks to how adults attempted to gently guide students' behavior in these post-prom events.

Further evidence of how seriously adults took youth's devotion to the prom lies in their attempts to utilize that outlook in their wider agenda of selling advertising or products. Magazine writers may have tried to encourage students to feel confident with themselves without spending much money. *Seventeen* advised girls that they mattered more than their clothes, "Wear clothes that become you, not the girl on the billboard at the Bijou. Don't gild the lily. Build the lily."⁸⁴ Gay Head tried to promote the virtues of moderation when she wrote, "There are those who say proms have become 'too wild' or 'too expensive.' In some schools, this may be true. It doesn't need to be true in *your* school, however. ... If you want it to be a wonderful and memorable evening, you can make it so – with careful planning, good judgment, and common sense."⁸⁵

Yet, these writers still felt consumption was integral to the prom and reinforced its role in the event. Even as Head tried to stress prom's accessibility, she too recognized how deeply consumption was linked to the prom experience. She believed that experience was valuable enough that students ought to find ways to be resourceful so they could afford it. To a student who worried about the prom costing too much, her response began, "*Don't* fall into the trap of believing that it takes a bulging wallet to have a good time. Plan carefully and you'll be able to have a wonderful evening without going into unnecessary debt to pay for it." She offered some practical advice about planning out the potential expenses, such as for tickets, transportation, or a tuxedo if necessary. She further suggested that the student plan to have dinner with the help of

⁸² "Overnight Choo-Choo Prom," *Seventeen*, May 1960, 130.

⁸³ "Prom Report USA," *Seventeen*, April 1962, 156.

⁸⁴ "Save Him the Waltz," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 99.

⁸⁵ Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl," *Senior Scholastic*, April 18, 1962, 30.

some mothers at someone's home rather than out at an expensive dinner. But she also recognized that planning for these prom essentials would require some funds and suggested that he find some odd jobs, "Once you have some idea of approximately what the evening will cost, why not see if there are ways in which you can earn a little extra cash?"⁸⁶ One student wrote in 1964 to say, "Boys are supposed to wear tuxedos to our school prom, but I don't own one and can't afford to rent one. Would it be proper for me to wear a dark suit?" In response, Head stressed the importance of dressing according to custom and said that "unfortunately, in some schools tuxedos are an absolute *must* for some dances."⁸⁷ She tried to be helpful by offering ideas such as striking a deal with a local tuxedo store to do some advertising or deliveries in exchange for a tuxedo, or to work with the prom committee to secure a group discount for students. She was sympathetic as she said, "Undoubtedly there are other boys who feel the same way you do, but are afraid to speak up. You would be doing them, as well as yourself, a service [in seeking a group discount]. Before you resort to your dark suit, use some of your ingenuity to get a tux. Ingenuity is often worth more than money."⁸⁸ Even though she focused on ingenuity and resourcefulness, she acknowledged that a certain amount of consumption was built into the evening.

Although some of *Seventeen's* articles encouraged its young female readers to adopt moderation, the magazine ultimately was bound to values of consumption. One article stressed girls' natural beauty but also urged them to take up a make-up routine, saying, "These [make-up routines] are planned to make you look as fresh and charming and naturally attractive as can be. Most important they both intend that you make full use of your rarest and most captivating cosmetic ... youth!"⁸⁹ Even while the article extolled youth's natural appearance, it urged girls that make-up would enhance their faces to their full potential. Stuart Sheedy, writing for *Seventeen*, encouraged girls that dressing more modestly at the prom would be more attractive to boys, "Boys are conservative creatures by and large – and while they will be pleased if you are memorable, they are apt to be rather uneasy if you are conspicuous." He continued, "You should bear in mind that your aim is to look pretty, natural, extremely well-bred, and just the least bit aristocratic. In other words, if you must err, do it on the conservative side."⁹⁰ Here, Sheedy used girls' desire to appeal to boys to press the adult concern that girls not dress too provocatively.

Whereas Gay Head encouraged her male readers to be resourceful, Sheedy assumed that *Seventeen's* female readers would already be determined to acquire a new dress: "Being human, you want a new dress for the occasion – and it's better than even money that you will get one by fair means or not-so-fair. You will instinctively think, plan, analyze, daydream, study, evaluate and reconsider the whole clothes question from every angle."⁹¹ Even though Sheedy followed this discussion of shopping for a new dress by telling girls not to be discouraged if a new dress was "completely and hopelessly out," his prose implies that girls should try everything before accepting this state of affairs; a new dress would be preferable and more fun for the ritual of gossiping about outfits with friends. *Seventeen* more explicitly promised transformation through consumption. One article claimed, "Slip the right evening dress down over your shoulders and you are a different girl. No one would ever believe that you can beat the boys at tennis – or that

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gay Head, "Talking It Over," *Senior Scholastic* November 11, 1964, 54.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Irma M. Phorylles, "Party Faces," *Seventeen*, December 1944, 58.

⁹⁰ Stuart E. Sheedy, "How to Enjoy a Prom," *Seventeen*, April 1955, 136.

⁹¹ Ibid.

you lead the geometry class, hands down. From the moment a long, swooshy skirt settles around your ankles, you take on new poise and charm.”⁹² While the article seemed to give confidence – “If you look the way we think you do – you needn’t worry!” – that confidence was also dependent on the attire.

Both *Scholastic* and *Seventeen* promoted fashions through photographic features around the prom. These magazine fashion spreads often doubled as advertisements, since they mentioned specific clothing items and which stores sold those fashions. These magazines had an editorial voice in choosing what these items were and how to feature them, but they also served to promote these products. *Seventeen* published fashion shoots based on stories of a girl visiting Annapolis in November 1954 and then Pennsylvania Military College in April 1955 for a formal prom weekend. For Annapolis, the magazine recommended that girls wear evening gowns, “perhaps like the luscious white dresses you saw on the cover or on the opposite page.”⁹³ The Pennsylvania Military College spread suggests different outfits to wear to the different occasions of the weekend: arriving on campus in a slim shirt dress with a Peter Pan collar (\$18), and then touring campus, attending a basketball game, and then the Military Ball, with specific notice that her outfits were available at Saks Fifth Avenue and other high-end department stores. The magazine also promoted a “Strawbridge and Clothier fashion show to be held at the Pennsylvania Military College during Spring Hop weekend.”⁹⁴ Twenty-four students from around the Philadelphia area were chosen to model the clothes seen in the magazine in a clear link between the magazine story and the retailer. As these magazines published these prom fashion shoots, they also promoted consumption of multiple outfits at their partner businesses.

Although *Seventeen* focused on girls, *Scholastic* tried to address boys’ needs as well. *Scholastic* ran one feature, “That Scholastic Look at the Prom,” in 1963 in an eight-page section about fashion with a prom scene. It included fashion options made by After-Six for men, such as a madras vest for \$11, a white jacket for \$30, and a seersucker coat with a black cummerbund. The magazine also informed boys about the etiquette for summer formalwear, saying, “White dinner jackets are worn with black dress trousers, black socks, and plain toe black ties or loafers. The season for summer formals is usually May 15th to Labor Day.”⁹⁵ In April 1965, the magazine again ran a several-page fashion section for men including “The Facts on going ‘formal.’” The accompanying text read, “Every man looks his best in dinner clothes, so don’t feel that dressing up is not for you. After all, your date for the dance will be wearing *her* prettiest dress. Do her proud!”⁹⁶ Whereas much of *Scholastic*’s advice column focused on proper behavior, these spreads in the magazine were merely about consuming to dress for prom. In using the prom as a pretext for these features, clothing companies took their understanding of how important the prom was to youth and applied that knowledge to their business agenda.

In addition to the editorial promotion of consumption, advertisers specifically targeted young readers with their own copy that used prom as an inducement to buy their products. As might be expected, make-up ads aimed at girls emphasized how their products could improve a girl’s life. A Woolworth’s ad talks about how its make-up could aid a girl in her popularity. It depicts a girl preparing for a blind date by going to Woolworth’s, saying, “If this ‘blind date’ doesn’t work out tonight, I won’t get to go to the prom next week.” After getting make-up and

⁹² “Your Evening Dress and How to Wear It,” *Seventeen*, November 1946, 136.

⁹³ “Weekend at Annapolis,” *Seventeen*, November 1954, 88.

⁹⁴ “Prom Weekend: Spring Hop at Pennsylvania Military College” *Seventeen*, April 1955, 110.

⁹⁵ “That Scholastic Look at the Prom,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 3, 1963, 19.

⁹⁶ “The Facts on going ‘formal’” *Senior Scholastic*, April 29, 1965, 22.

hair accessories, and the girl asks later, “Is this really me? I’ve never been so popular!”⁹⁷ The ad gives credit for her social success to Woolworth’s and promises the reader a prom date. Similarly, Ipana Toothpaste advertised in April 1949 in *Seventeen* showing 21-year-old model Mary Mohr at a “college prom” and promising that she used Ipana toothpaste.⁹⁸ Companies’ advertisements traded on aspirations of youth to be like the promgoers in their ads.

Ads for girls particularly addressed their insecurities about their complexion and how that would negatively affect their prospects for prom. Angel Face Make-Up advertised, “No nasty blemishes are going to keep me from a prom! I hide them with Angel Face Medicated Make-up – and prom, here I come!”⁹⁹ A sequence of photographs showed the girl preparing for her prom, calling the prom the “Biggest Night of the Year,” and her excitement over her date. The ad emphasized that the girl is on the prom committee and helps with decorating for the dance, but she has a poor complexion that she successfully covers up before her date comes over, “Gosh, I’m glad I’m wearing my Angel Face complexion. Even up close, he thinks I’m naturally pretty.” The result is that he says he thinks this is the start of a serious relationship, and she says, “Honestly, things like this are *always* happening to girls who wear Angel Face! (How about you?)”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, a pHisoHex advertisement asked whether the reader was watching others dance but not dancing herself because she had acne, and recommended that pHisoHex would help.¹⁰¹ Both of these advertisements propose to girls that using their products would improve their prom outlook.

Advertisers did not only target girls, but also aimed their advertisements at boys. A 1958 ad by Arrow Shirts in *Scholastic* showed a boy writing in the dance card of the girl standing next to him with the caption, “Prom-groomed – class-groomed – in Arrow Classic Whites.”¹⁰² The ad implied that a boy wearing these shirts would have success in getting dances with girls at the prom. In choosing to base their advertisements on the prom, these companies showed their recognition of the prom’s importance to young people.

Advertisers also found opportunity to reach out to youth through other aspects of the prom. General Motors prepared a five-picture ad, which the teacher’s section described as “promoting ‘prom-time’ safety.”¹⁰³ The ad was titled, “Dad lent me his car for our senior prom,” and showed five panels of a boy driving the car to the prom, each containing a different safety lesson. This boy was a goody-goody, dressed in a white jacket tux and boasting, “I’ve never had an accident – or even a close call – because I never take chances when I take the wheel.” The pictures show him refusing to run a yellow light, keeping his eyes on the road, leaving the crosswalk clear, and helping his date out of his car all with sanctimonious captions. The final panel read, “Young Drivers Can Be Safe Drivers.”¹⁰⁴ While many teens might not identify with this overly wholesome character, the ad shows how adults were using the occasion of prom as a way to reach youth, and perhaps to appeal to their parents, who might share the ad’s concern about reckless driving among teens. Singer Sewing Machine Company promoted sewing one’s own prom dress on one of their machines in contrast with the many advertisements for ready-made clothes. The ad featured “15-year-old Lynn Thompson, popular New York high school

⁹⁷ Woolworth’s Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, April 24, 1964, 27.

⁹⁸ Ipana Toothpaste Ad, *Seventeen*, April 1949, 1.

⁹⁹ Angel Face Make-up Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, April 24, 1964, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ pHisoHex Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, November 4, 1966, 3.

¹⁰² Arrow Shirts Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, December 12, 1958, 29.

¹⁰³ “Promoting ‘Prom-Time’ Safety,” *Senior Scholastic*, May 9, 1958, 4T.

¹⁰⁴ “Dad Lent Me His Car for Our Senior Prom,” *Senior Scholastic*, May 9, 1958, 25.

junior and fashion model” who made the dress because “she wanted a new dress for a rather special date.” She said it was easy and perfect to make it herself rather than have her mom make it.¹⁰⁵ The ad used teens’ ideas of popularity and of the prom, but also perhaps tried to appeal to a student who did not have the money to buy a new ready-to-wear dress.

Other companies used prom in their advertising copy even when their products were only tangentially related to the prom. A Bell Telephone ad depicted a girl talking on the phone with her friend, saying “...and then he asked me to the prom! Honestly, Sue, I was speechless! He called to tell me our team won the baseball game today, and then he asked me to the prom! It was so unexpected ... who would have thought that I’d go to my first formal with a dreamy boy like Mike!” The ad continued, “It’s times like these that you most appreciate your phone – when it brings exciting invitations to fun and when you can relay the good news to your friends. But your phone brings fun *every* day, in friendly chats and surprise calls. It helps keep you popular!”¹⁰⁶ In choosing to target teens, the telephone company showed a belief in teens’ power in the market to influence their families’ choices of telephone service. The ad sought to win over teens by crediting the phone for a student’s popularity and emphasizing how the phone was the means of communication in dating for the prom. Another ad by Kellogg’s Cornflakes spoke to students’ love of dancing by offering a song called, “Doin’ the Flake” by Gary Lewis and the Playboys and instructions to a corresponding dance step. Readers could send in their cereal box top and 35 cents to receive the recording.¹⁰⁷ Kellogg evidently felt that teens’ love of dancing would impel them to eat Cornflakes. Even the National Coffee Association attempted to utilize the prom to promote their product. A 16-page ad in *Scholastic* by the trade group gave advice to students on “how to face your public without falling on your face,” including how to wear formalwear and etiquette about corsages. Individual pages each had titles such as “How to be Likeable and still be Yourself,” and “How to be as good looking as you really are.”¹⁰⁸ The advertisement was unclear about how coffee contributed to facing one’s public, but saw an opportunity to reach teen consumers through messages about the prom.

By homing in on the role of consumption in the prom, adults sought to profit from youth’s dedication to this ritual. Students were not oblivious to adults’ motives. A cynical editorial from Mission High School stated in 1970, “It may be somewhat harsh to call it a ‘racket,’ but at what other time of the year do businessmen go out of their way to ‘help’ students show all their school spirit or to celebrate the highlights of their school years?”¹⁰⁹ Yet students did not halt their consumption. Magazine writers may have tried to urge moderation, but that message conflicted with the publications’ livelihood, which relied on revenue from advertisers. Companies incorporated the prom into their advertisements in an attempt to appeal to teen consumers who would have fond feelings towards the prom. While these businesses utilized the prom in the search for profit, they confirmed the prom’s strength as a student tradition.

The flow of adult commentary on the prom dwindled in *Scholastic* in the mid-1960s. *Seventeen* had a dry spell of information on the prom in the late 1960s. They had a single fashion spread based on the prom in 1970, but it took a few more years before the magazine began running prom articles regularly in 1973. This lack of prom material shows editors altering their

¹⁰⁵ Singer Sewing Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, October 17, 1958, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Bell Telephone Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, May 9, 1958, 36.

¹⁰⁷ “Doing the Flake” Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, October 14, 1965, 2.

¹⁰⁸ National Coffee Association Ad, *Senior Scholastic*, October 31, 1958, 17-32.

¹⁰⁹ “Graduation ... A Priceless (?) Experience,” *West Wing* (Mission High School), May 20, 1970, p. 2.

focus to respond to changing interests among students. For example, in the May 2, 1968, issue of *Senior Scholastic*, a student wrote to Gay Head about feeling guilty about not being as much of an activist as a friend.¹¹⁰ Other articles from the late 1960s reveal that students were less enthusiastic about the role dances should play in student life. One student Don Segerstrom from California represented those students who believed student government ought to do more than hold social activities. He claimed that his high school had avoided student apathy because the student government had worked to involve the other students. Segerstrom emphasized that “you won’t have a popular or an effective student government if all it does is plan dances.”¹¹¹ Gay Head noted this change in mood by publishing a query from a class president who wrote, “I think that as a class we ought to do constructive things to help people. But all this class votes for is social events. How can I get my ideas across?” Head responded that the president should propose some ideas, but acknowledge that “you are a social organization, too, and you needn’t be ashamed of it. One or two charitable projects a year, well done, may be all your group can handle.”¹¹² Her response encouraged student governments to embrace a wider agenda, but she noted that students still expected social events. She emphasized that social events were a worthy endeavor as well. This tension surrounding the role of student government seems not to have been resolved in this period. Nevertheless, commentary in these magazines suggests how adults continued to take youth’s concerns seriously and were influenced by students’ wishes even as adults sought to guide students.

During the immediate postwar period, a flowering of advice about prom commenced in the pages of *Senior Scholastic* and *Seventeen*. Adults who had attended high school would have been able to draw upon their own prom experiences in relating to youth at this time. Magazine writers counseled students not just on details of etiquette, but also on self-esteem and consideration for others. Students who read these columns would have found a sympathetic ear for their anxieties. Adults recognized they needed to reach out to students on youths’ terms, and sought to suggest responsible values and behavior rather than impose them. Such was the pattern for teachers, men’s clubs, and parents, organizing post-prom events. They sought to bring youth together in a safe environment, which was an attractive alternative to the draws of larger nearby cities. In this period, youth flocked to these events enthusiastically as these post-prom events made them feel special. Magazines and advertisers also sought to appeal to students in their promotion of consumption as a vital part of the prom. In valuing the dollars teens might spend, they recognized teens as independent consumers. Thus while these various groups of adults had differing agendas, they embraced an attitude towards youth that was one of respect but also one of guidance. They were sympathetic to youth culture but also tried to offer an adult perspective. These efforts made by adults may have perpetuated the prom’s status as a rite of passage, which called for students to turn to adults for advice and knowledge.

¹¹⁰ Gay Head, “Talking It Over,” *Senior Scholastic*, May 2, 1968, 29.

¹¹¹ “The Generation Gap,” *Senior Scholastic*, October 13, 1969, 10.

¹¹² Gay Head, “Talking It Over,” *Senior Scholastic*, March 16, 1970, 18-19.

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