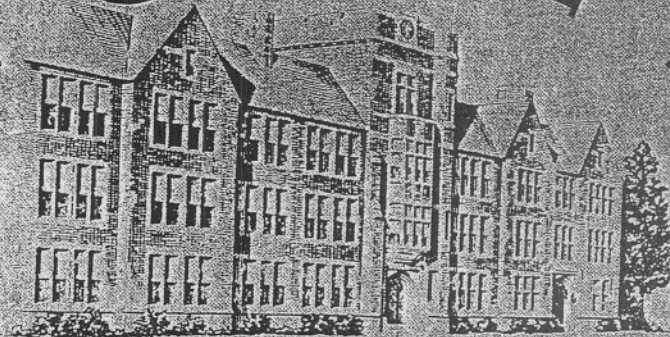


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## CHAPTER ONE

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# *An Elite Public School*

## 1953–1965

We can hardly believe our good fortune.

—*Hamilton High yearbook, 1954*

In the fall of 1953 the city of Median opened a new high school on the east side of town. With a population of 220,000, Median was like a smaller Pittsburgh—a northeastern city whose expanding economy was a diversified mixture of old and new industries. Steel plants belched on the west side of town, and the northern suburbs were spotted with industrial parks for electronic and scientific equipment. It was a city in which ethnic and parish identity were apt to be the most prominent descriptors of social position. In the most heavily ethnic neighborhoods, housing seldom came on the open market but was sold by Italians, Poles, Irish, or Germans at the Turnverein or at a bingo game in the Church of the Assumption parish hall. More than a third of the city's children were enrolled in neighborhood parochial schools which, like most of the public schools, had a distinct ethnic and social composition.

The new school, Hamilton High, had been built in the hills of the newly developed upper-middle-class east side. Hamilton's students were primarily the children of managers, professionals, and faculty at the local university. The district also encompassed a middle-class Jewish neighborhood and drew a number of upwardly mobile ethnics, who had sacrificed life in their old neighborhoods to ascend the corporate ladder. Although suburban growth was beginning to escalate, the city's best academic high schools were still regarded as far superior to the small, noncentralized high schools in the surrounding towns. Some corporate executives left the countryside when their children entered

high school, so that their sons and daughters could learn Latin, Greek, German, or Russian and choose sequences of advanced mathematics at Hamilton or old Central High. Salary scales for city teachers exceeded those in the suburbs, with the Central and Hamilton faculties being considered the elite of the teaching corps.

Later, after Sputnik, conservative critics would escalate their attacks on the schools; but in these early Eisenhower years, only an occasional cranky letter to the *Median Herald* was critical of the city's school system. There were no nationally administered tests, no published comparisons of school performance, no tax revolts. The schools were growing, and each decade produced a higher percentage of the age cohort completing high school. Median ran ahead of the national average, with two-thirds of the cohort completing high school in 1950. The local college and university doubled in size, encouraged by the GI Bill and the growing national faith in education as an avenue of upward mobility. Graduates of the city's schools found jobs in a booming economy or admission to an expanding system of higher education.

Opening day at Hamilton High was a festive occasion. The mayor spoke at the ribbon-cutting ceremony as proud parents stood by. Some of the fathers had recently turned out to mix cement and pour new sidewalks so that the school could open with something better than muddy paths (construction overruns had forced cancellation of this kind of finishing work). In the first year the parents raised \$2,500 for the Hamilton High Athletic Association. Fifteen years later, Hamilton's parents, angered at the chaos and fearful for their children, would chain the doors and attempt to shut the school. But on this day in 1953, they admired the new audio labs, the acoustically designed auditorium, and the bold enameled lockers in twenty-seven different colors. Some joked that it was the Howard Johnson's of high schools. Its low-slung yellow brick and glass architecture set on a thirty-acre campus on the boundary between city and suburbs led to its also being called the Country Club. Hamilton presented a sharp contrast to the grimy brick and neoclassical style of the earlier city high schools. The other school teams took buses to practice in nearby city parks, whereas Hamilton High had its own tennis courts and playing fields. Hamilton's twelve hundred students were virtually all white, although an occasional black from the inner-city boundary of the Hamilton district

would be admitted. Blacks were concentrated in the old fifteenth ward downtown, served by Central High. White children growing up in Median commonly referred to the fifteenth ward as "colored town" or "nigger town," just as they referred to the old area of Jewish bakeries and kosher meat shops as "Jew town." The Irish, on Emerald Hill, kept shooting out the red traffic light until police put the green on top, and their speech was sprinkled with frequent references to "wops" and "polacks." In later years, when a large wing housing vocational training programs was added, Central became Central Tech. Then an optional zone was created between Central Tech and Hamilton, and blacks were often advised to attend Tech because "they have the programs for you down there." But in the early 1950s the black school population was less than two thousand citywide and there were no perceptible tensions. The large gap between black and white graduation rates at Central Tech went for the most part unnoticed.

In candid photos, the students in Hamilton's first class are neatly groomed and clean-cut. Carefully coiffed girls in sweaters, skirts, and often pearls smile at boys in crew cuts and baggy khakis. The foreword to the 1954 yearbook sums up the spirit of pride and boosterism that characterized the school: "This first year has been spent in a school so different, so impressive in its usefulness and beauty, that we can hardly believe our good fortune. We do realize what a privilege it was for us to have been the first graduating class." The book was divided by headings such as "We Were Eager to Learn" and, referring to the teachers, "They Led Us to Achievement." High school students were still referred to as "boys" and "girls" and treated as minors—unless they left school to work or marry, which was expected for the girl who "got pregnant." The teenage years were a moratorium between childhood and adult status. Teens often had loose reins and light chaperonage, but recognized that the reins could be pulled tightly if bounds were overstepped. In a few decades students would demand adult rights, but now they were content to play symbolic leadership roles in the student status system. A student reporter for the school newspaper, the *Record*, wrote of the new student council president: "As one of his first duties as head of the Student Council, Peter will have to appoint a 'Lost and Found' committee to carry on this important duty. The student body can help this committee by placing

found articles in the large green box outside the vice principal's office."<sup>1</sup> Earnest editorials in *The Record*, unselfconscious about male pronouns, urged students to strengthen school spirit:

By participating in activities such as newspaper, sports, choir, Girls' League, one can develop an interest for himself. If homework is done when assigned, subjects and classrooms will be more inspiring. The pupil must be receptive to interests, activities, and classwork by cultivating the right attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

Students also criticized cheating in a school they granted was highly competitive, warning the transgressors: "Sooner or later you will be found out to be a phony and will feel like a worthless heel."<sup>3</sup> Pride in the school, its facilities, and its upkeep was a constant concern, with one editorial even scolding students for spilling their chicken soup and "gorging those hoagies as if their life depended on it." Another said "the pretty formica tops on the cafeteria tables should inspire students to be neat at lunch. Custom and good breeding require pupils to use proper receptacles for trash, bottles should be returned as directed, anything spilled should be mopped up."<sup>4</sup>

God and country were prominent themes in the school. All of Hamilton's students regularly donated blood during the Red Cross drives. President Eisenhower's proclamation changing the pledge of allegiance to read "one nation under God" was noted on the front page of the school paper, and a student poll in 1954 showed that 71 percent of the boys favored universal military service, as the draft was then called (78 percent of the boys and 96 percent of the girls also said girls should prepare for careers other than marriage, reflecting the white-collar and liberal cast of the school community). A school assembly was held that year to acknowledge the receipt of "twenty-eight authentic reproductions of the priceless documents of America's freedom," which had been part of the Freedom Train exhibit that passed through town. The president of the local patriotic group that presented the gift assured the students that "no boy or girl who knows and reveres these documents will ever become a Communist."<sup>5</sup>

The adolescent status hierarchies at Hamilton were similar to those delineated by James Coleman in his study of American high schools in the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup> There was a strong emphasis on being popular, being "good looking," and wearing stylish clothes. The most highly

esteemed males were the athlete-scholars, while the warmest admiration was given to the girls who were most popular with boys and in the "leading crowd." Even though the girls learned to appear not to pursue academic success, they respected scholarly girls. Each issue of the student paper profiled an admired student. A typical male entry highlights active leadership on and off the field:

Actions speak louder than words, and Bill H. is the personification of this adage. Football, track, sophomore and A Cappella choirs, plus majors in Latin, Math, and Science keep Bill constantly on the move. Hard work has its rewards. Not only was he Hamilton's delegate to Boys' State . . . this summer, but he was also the recipient of the Harvard Book Award in 1955.

The girl's profile in the same issue subordinates her academic record to her friendliness and style-consciousness:

Every Tuesday afternoon after school the voice of a tall blonde with a friendly smile can be heard saying, "The meeting will now come to order." That girl is Karen W., president of the Girls' League. Karen, one of the most active members of the senior class, has participated in many school sports and is now a traffic guide. An alumna of Johnson's Fashion Board, she modeled this summer at the State Fair . . . Karen maintains an A average and hopes to take Liberal Arts at Smith, Vassar, or Wellesley. We feel that she will continue her excellent scholastic and social standing wherever she goes.<sup>7</sup>

Karen and Bill were members of the leading crowd who set the norms of the peer culture and, as in Coleman's study, accentuated the most prominent characteristics of the social class of the school. "A boy or girl in such a system," he wrote, "finds it governed by an elite whose backgrounds exemplify, in the extreme, those of the dominant population group. Hence a working class boy or girl will be most left out in an upper middle class school."<sup>8</sup> This certainly characterized Hamilton High of the 1950s, when fewer than 15 percent of its students would have been classified as working class, and only a handful as poor enough to need to apply to the school's loan fund to rent textbooks that had been purchased by other students. For the most part these students either dropped out of school when at age sixteen they were permitted to do so, or they attempted to emulate the leaders in a bid for social mobility.

The eight Greek-letter societies played a key role in assigning student status. The most cherished success was to win acceptance into a fraternity or a sorority. One fraternity and two sororities were reserved for Jews, and the best sorority had at one time admitted only two Catholics each year. These policies resembled those of the parents' country clubs, although some liberal and intellectual parents frowned on the fraternity culture. While not officially recognized, the Greek societies established the school's real social calendar, with hayrides and elaborate rushing parties in the fall and dances in the spring. A former sorority president recalled how the school's vice principal discreetly inquired about the sorority's schedule before fixing dates for official school activities. Hazing practices, such as requiring initiates to wear bizarre clothing to school, were never questioned at a time when the school had stiff dress codes. The fraternities used a blackball system, passing around a little box with white and black marbles when it came time to vote. A female former student said, "I guess it wasn't fair. Well, I mean my friends got in and our relatives got in. But there were plenty of girls who just weren't popular enough or attractive enough, or clever enough and the same thing applied to boys, and yet they might have been wonderful people."

Although it was painful to be rejected, the values underlying the marketing of personality were widely accepted. Teachers controlled the academic awards, but students allocated esteem in the peer culture. At Hamilton most students worked hard both at their books and at being accepted. The rules of the game were taken for granted. Some students might be afflicted by doubts about the rightness of their world, as indicated by an editorial asking "Are We Snobs?"<sup>9</sup> but doubts were the exception, self-confidence the rule. Privilege was balanced by an emphasis on volunteer service and good works. Hamilton thought itself liberal and proudly sponsored early foreign-student exchanges arranged by the American Field Service. In the 1950s most students saw no conflict between accepting fraternities segregated by race and religion, and writing editorials condemning the practice of segregation in the South. Commenting on the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, a student wrote: "We have found, to our great surprise, that our country is not so perfect . . . We have found that in the southern part of the United States discrimination beyond belief has been practiced—right under our own noses."<sup>10</sup> Northern *de facto* seg-

regation was still unnoticed, but in two decades it would affect the life of virtually every student in the city.

By 1960 Hamilton was regarded as the leading high school in the area. When more than a score of county high schools competed for sixty scholarships awarded by state examination, Hamilton students won twenty-three of them.<sup>11</sup> A team of twenty-six evaluators headed by a professor from Temple University visited the school in the 1959–60 academic year as part of the Middle States accreditation process. It was the first time any city school had undergone such a process, and the *Median Herald* bannered the result: "Hamilton High Named Top-Ranking Institution." The evaluators found that over 85 percent of Hamilton graduates went on to some form of postsecondary education. Teachers and administrators were cited for "maintaining superior discipline, high morale, willingness to take on extra school responsibility, and high professional training and background." While the school was commended for "its excellent academic program for college-bound students," the report concluded that the "business education training" for those seeking employment after graduation was only "adequate." "A strong, almost pathological resistance to taking non-college preparation courses exists in this school community," the evaluators noted, adding that the staff "blames this almost exclusively upon parents and students . . . we wonder, however, how much of this feeling is due, at least in part, to the strong emphasis, and just pride, of the staff and its program for the majority."<sup>12</sup>

The competition for grades was keen, and teachers recall that students could be fiercely persistent in arguing for half a point on an exam. The *Hamilton Record* offered articles on how to study for tests and ran a regular feature, "College Corner," profiling colleges to which students might apply.<sup>13</sup> Following a tradition more common to preparatory schools than to public high schools, at the end of each year the *Record* ran a list of the colleges to which seniors had been admitted, a list that always included a number of the most selective liberal arts colleges in the East. The anxiety about getting into the right college is reflected in this essay in the 1960 Hamilton yearbook:

We worked especially hard this year because we knew that this was our last chance to raise those marks for college entrance, but sometimes it was hard to buckle down with so many things to do—work on scholarship examinations, and of course fill out those endless college appli-

cations. It was certainly hard for some to choose a college with the names of so many fine schools buzzing in our heads, but we fought to meet the deadlines, and then all we could do was buckle down and wait.

The level of achievement in the school was undoubtedly related to the high expectations of parents, teachers, and students. Although only sixteen units were required for graduation—including one year of math and science and no foreign language—most college-bound students took two or three years of these subjects. The school day was short, beginning at 9:00 A.M. and ending at 2:30 P.M., with an hour and a half off for three lunch periods. Students spent less than four hours a day in academic classes, but homework usually required two hours or more a night.

Staff appointment to Hamilton was regarded as a plum, and faculty who came in those years recall that it was an ideal place to teach. The school was orderly; hallways glistened and lateness to class was a rarity. Students showed deference to teachers and seldom needed more than a stern glance to correct misbehavior. In fact, students vied to serve teachers, releasing them from onerous policing tasks. Honor-roll students were selected to oversee the cafeteria during lunch hours and to check passes and regulate hallway traffic. One could readily distinguish the students from the teachers—male teachers wore jackets and ties, female teachers wore dresses or skirts. A teacher would never be hugged in the hallway. The dress code reflected social distance and respect for authority.

There was also hierarchy among the staff. Young teachers did not make waves or challenge the senior staff. Department heads enjoyed reduced teaching loads, and some had little "offices" with private telephones in the corner of their classrooms. Innovations were adopted slowly and differences in teaching philosophy were muted. A teacher appointed in 1962 who spent the first semester as a "floater" with no permanent room of her own remembers the reprimand she received for pushing another teacher's desk aside to suit her informal lecturing style. At lunch on her first day in 1955 a young teacher was told by an older teacher, "You took my parking space this morning."

Harry Payne, a former coach and chemistry teacher, came to Hamilton High as principal in 1953. He remained in the post until his retirement in 1968, although he was not widely admired. The best teachers found him loud and insensitive, but he ruled with unques-

tioned authority. Like the students and a number of the teachers, he lived in the neighborhood. It was, as a student of the fifties described it, "a homogeneous social structure that's so tight, where everybody knows everybody and has gone over to everybody's house and you've called people up all the time." Payne had few doubts about what most parents expected of him: that he would enforce middle-class standards of courtesy and respect, emphasize a college preparatory curriculum, and put winning teams on the Hamilton field—especially the football field. Few rules and regulations needed to be written down; they were assumed to be understood and shared by all. Parents and teachers might occasionally disagree with Payne's interpretation. He had a "Queeg-like streak," one teacher said, referring to the obsessive fictional character, and once called an assembly to lecture students for letting their shirt tails hang out. He was a large man—6 feet 4 inches, and physically intimidating. On rare occasions when a boy "got out of line," Payne might shove him against his office door for an eyeball-to-eyeball talk.

Once appointed, principals were rarely removed and they expected to run their schools with a free hand. The district had few guidelines and interference was minimal, as long as a school was orderly. Payne enjoyed wide discretion in interpreting and enforcing the rules, hiring or removing teachers, suspending or expelling students. He was known to play favorites among teachers and students, but he was seldom challenged—appealing a principal's decision was virtually unheard of.

Although he visited the classes of new teachers and would seek to transfer those not up to Hamilton's standards, Payne was not seen as a curriculum or instruction leader. He was credited with running a tight ship and was popular in the community because his teams were generally winners—he had formerly raised money to take a championship football team to Florida. The school earned a strong academic reputation because it drew highly motivated college-bound students whom the best teachers wanted to teach, especially in such a pleasant campus setting. The success of the school, however, had little to do with the principal-as-leader theories that became popular several decades later. The school enjoyed high community esteem built on a strong parental consensus about the aim of education: to get their children into "good" colleges.

By 1960 there were two blacks among the three hundred fifty stu-

dents who graduated from Hamilton High. Suburban growth quickened and the 1960 census showed a population decline in the city. The loss was slight, about 2 percent, although it indicated a pattern of whites leaving as the black population in the inner city more than doubled in the 1950s, from five thousand to twelve thousand. Four-fifths of the black population lived in the center of the city in eight of Median's sixty-one census tracts. When civil rights organizations began to press the issue of racial imbalance in the early 1960s, the school board of Median denied that desegregation was its proper concern. Most black children attended two elementary schools in the central city. To relieve overcrowding there, in 1962 the board attempted to redraw attendance zones in a way that would have created a third predominantly black school. The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) opposed the boundary changes and demanded that the board examine the patterns of segregation citywide in order to reduce racial imbalance in the schools. The president of the board rejected the request: "I don't accept that racial imbalance creates any kind of missed opportunity. I don't think the schools accept responsibility for solving what is basically a housing problem."<sup>14</sup>

So CORE picketed the Board of Education headquarters and organized a successful boycott at a virtually all-black elementary school, thereby bringing black demands for quality desegregated education to the attention of the wider community. Several months later, in August 1962, the mayor responded to CORE's request by establishing an Education Study Committee under the aegis of the state's Commission for Human Rights. This brought civil rights activists, school staff, and school board members into regular communication. A year later the state commissioner of education required all state school districts to report the extent of racial imbalance and propose plans to eliminate it. The mayor's education committee reported to the Board of Education a month later, declaring that "there does exist a pattern of racial imbalance in our public schools [that] . . . is inconsistent with basic principles of education in a free democratic society."<sup>15</sup> It urged the board to formulate proposals for redistricting the schools with the aim of achieving racial balance a primary consideration.

In the fall of 1963 a new school superintendent was appointed and the school board adopted a policy statement that partially accepted the stance recommended by the mayor's education committee. It said,

"Racial balance is an additional factor to be considered in boundary revisions," but in a manner consistent with providing "the best possible education for all pupils . . . in the neighborhood schools."<sup>16</sup> In the next two years the school board did close some elementary schools and changed boundaries to create more racial balance at the grade-school level.

Previously the board's primary response to civil rights protests had been compensatory education to upgrade and enrich the education offered in the predominantly black schools. This effort was known as the Jefferson Area Project, after the junior high school in the fifteenth ward. Supported by Ford Foundation and state education department grants, the project reduced class sizes to a 15:1 student-teacher ratio in the predominantly black schools. It also provided special instruction in reading and mathematics, team teaching, cultural enrichment, and summer school programs. When the project was evaluated in 1965, the progress of black students at Jefferson was compared with that of some of their classmates who had been transferred to Eastern, the junior high that Hamilton students attended.

The evaluation showed that the compensatory education programs had had a positive effect on attendance at Jefferson and had increased community concern for education, but there was no significant improvement in academic achievement at Jefferson. There had been a substantial improvement, however, in achievement on the part of the black students who had been transferred to Eastern without the benefit of any special compensatory programs.

The results impressed the school board, and in particular the president who had earlier denied that the board should take responsibility for remedying neighborhood segregation. Not just the improved scores impressed him, but the realization that Jefferson and Eastern had distinctly different climates for achievement. He said he learned that Jefferson students felt that "if you cooperated with your teacher and did your homework, you were a 'kook.' At Eastern Junior High School, if you don't cooperate with the teacher and don't do your homework, you were a 'kook.'" Testifying later at a hearing conducted by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, he said, "This is what persuaded me . . . and this evidence was good enough so that it was reasonably persuasive to anybody who wanted to be open-minded about it."<sup>17</sup>

Simultaneously, an urban renewal project in the Jefferson area

demolished hundreds of homes occupied by poor blacks in order to clear land for new highways, a medical center, and middle-income and university student housing. Renewal officials told the school board that the schools must be upgraded to attract whites to the new middle-income housing. Public housing for blacks and low-income families was also being constructed in outlying areas, some of it within the Hamilton district. The first major federal aid program for elementary and secondary education had passed in 1965, and unless de facto as well as de jure segregated schooling was abolished, federal aid would be withheld.

All of these influences helped create a watershed in school policy. The school administration developed a comprehensive desegregation plan to begin in the 1965-66 school year. It involved closing one of the segregated elementary schools as well as Jefferson Junior High, and busing nine hundred black students to nineteen predominantly white schools throughout the city. Notably, no white students would be bused.

Hamilton High had been little affected by the earlier, broader changes in the city. The few black families who had moved into the Hamilton district during the early 1960s were those of ministers and middle-class professionals. In yearbook pictures the sons emulated Sidney Poitier and the daughters wore their hair like Jacqueline Kennedy. Whites did not think of these families as tokenism; most were proud that Hamilton High was an integrated school. Liberal Hamilton parents and their children participated in the March on Washington in 1963. Social studies teachers recall the fervor with which students discussed Martin Luther King's now-famous address. Like the student who had written the editorial in 1956 applauding the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, a majority viewed racism as primarily a southern problem.

While the letters to the *Hamilton Record* continued to debate issues such as school spirit and whether girls should be permitted to wear miniskirts to school, students who had participated in the civil rights demonstration began to voice other protests. A student who won a writing award, described in the *Record* as "active in the peace movement" and a participant in "teach-ins and demonstrations," used the occasion to criticize the bureaucracy at Hamilton. "The purpose of education is to disseminate knowledge, not to enforce conformity."<sup>18</sup>

The fraternity and sorority system was also criticized. After agreeing that members of these organizations do some charitable work, one student wrote:

Don't these societies instill a false sense of values in their members? . . . Emphasis on admittance into groups like these may permanently mar both those who are and those who are not accepted. For some students rejection may mean resentment, feelings of inferiority and lasting hatred of the upper classes of our society. Unfortunately, the toll taken on the vast number who belong is even worse. Prejudice and conformity of some sort are ingrained in their souls.<sup>19</sup>

The letter brought spirited rebuttals by defenders of the fraternity-sorority system, which continued into the 1970s at Hamilton. An insult at a fraternity party was alleged to be the cause of the first major riot at Hamilton in 1968. By that time, the younger siblings of those who had marched to Washington were accusing the blacks who came to Hamilton in greater numbers of "ruining our school."