

Central High School:

PITTSBURGH'S FIRST

By S. Trevor Hadley

ANY weekday morning it is perfectly natural to see teenagers boarding buses on their way to high school. Today, employment in our technologically advanced society virtually requires a high school degree, but in the past even attendance was not compulsory.

The prominent role of public secondary education in our culture tends to obscure its early history, which in Pittsburgh began modestly 135 years ago.

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Top: Central in 1855, in what today would be the 500 block of Smithfield Street. *Above:* Third graduating class, 1861.



In September 1855, the Board of Education in Pittsburgh opened its first high school. It rented rooms on the third and fourth floors of a building on Smithfield Street for \$450 per year, and once the owner installed gas lights, the school opened.¹ Located where the Mellon Bank building now stands across from Kaufmann's Department Store, the school had primitive facilities with rooms poorly lit, improperly ventilated, oddly arranged, and rarely warm enough.

Here old "Central High School" eked out a meager existence for years — very meager according to one student's account; he found it to be a colorful, although not educationally conducive, setting:

Smithfield Street in those days was paved with cobblestones, and there were no car tracks beyond Fifth Avenue. Drays were numerous and noisy; there were no railroad sidings to the mills and factories, consequently teaming was an important business. The heavy wagons hauling iron products of all sizes and shapes, massive timber wheels with unwieldy castings of many tons weight swinging from their beam and hauled by numerous horses, as many as 30 frequently, clattering omnibuses, the rattle of the mail wagons coming and going almost hourly, all the conveyances in common use combined to make Smithfield Street, a bridge street, a bedlam, and then as now, one of the most travelled thoroughfares in the city.

The pandemonium of noise necessitated closed windows and brought out their repeated admonition from the professors, "Louder. Speak more loudly, please."

Even when there occurred a lull in the traffic on the street, from one of the store windows downstairs, where "Cheap John," an auctioneer, held forth, there came the reiterated cry, "I have one dollar; who'll give the half?" And always on the street below a busker played antiquated tunes on an accordion, both wheezy and breezy, and to make matters worse his repertoire was small, hence we knew all his tunes and were full up with accordion malady.

It was a blessed relief when one or more of the predatory rats that infested the place or even some quick action mice, emboldened by hunger, would emerge from one of the numerous crannies in the old building and begin to forage from the leftovers from the lunch pails. This sort of invasion invariably led to action. Any missile in reach — a piece of chalk, a small lump of coal, an inkwell or its cover, perhaps a surreptitious bone would be hurled at the rodents, and with the resultant racket, the recitation would be interrupted.²

This eyewitness account of education in the Smithfield Street school hardly engenders nostalgia for the "good old days."

The first principal of the school, Reverend Jacob LaGrange McKown, a graduate of Wesleyan University, had been hired or drafted from Cooperstown, New York, at a yearly salary of \$2,000.³ Early faculty

members included Philotus Dean (natural sciences), William Dickson (mathematics), and Mary Maitland, who was the "female assistant."⁴

Central's first class consisted of 18 boys and 16 girls, only three of whom graduated three years later. Graduation exercises were held before a large crowd of parents and friends in Lafayette Hall, an L-shaped, four-story brick building on the corner of Fourth and Wood streets which was used for many years for all kinds of public meetings. Miss Heppie Wilkens, the first graduate of Central High School, had the honor of receiving the first diploma because she was a girl; later she became Mrs. Joseph S. Hamilton and made her home in Bellevue for many years. William C. King, another graduate, founded the King Glass Company and became a successful businessman in Pittsburgh. The third graduate, Kuno Kuhn, spent his life working in the oil business in Bradford, Pennsylvania.⁵ The small size of the class caused the major Pittsburgh newspaper of the day to editorialize: "The mountain has labored for four long years at great expense to the city and produced only three live mice."⁶

Thus Pittsburgh's first high school made its premiere in shoddy facilities, more than six years before the Civil War. One of the last eyewitness accounts of life in the old high school indicates that even though the student body did grow, few capital improvements were made:

There were 80 students admitted with my class, but all did not attend. We spent seven dreary months there, mostly winter months with the grime, smoke, and murkiness characteristic of Pittsburgh in those years when the consumption of our juicy bituminous coal was universal. It was a rare day when recitations were held without having the gas lights lit. From the rear windows we looked down into the gloomy depths of Splane's Court, very much like looking into the mouth of a coal pit, as the drift entries then common in the city were called. This court was always dark and repressive, a real gloom provoker. We did not know what class of people were domiciled there, but we pitied them. We thought they might be some of the few descendants of Caesar's who had strayed out to Pittsburgh.⁷

Support for public education of any kind in Pittsburgh was relatively new. It had taken more than two decades early in the nineteenth century to develop popular support for public elementary schools, and it took even longer to extend that support to secondary school. So, when Central High was established, the school was unpopular with the general public. The ordinary citizen groused that he was having to help support a school which primarily served the children of the rich. And economic hard times meant that most children went to work at 14 to help support their families.⁸ In fact, at one point, opposition to the high school became so strong that the alumni banded to-

gether and passed a resolution which was published in all the city's newspapers:

Whereas the attack lately made upon the Faculty of the high school has, though unsuccessful, attained a widespread publicity and has left a prejudicial impression on the minds of some, therefore, be it Resolved:

The Alumni Association of Pittsburgh Central High School, than whom none are in a better position to judge, do hereby express our entire confidence in the faculty as now constituted and our hearty appreciation of the marked success that has attended their earnest efforts in the cause of higher education of the people at large.⁹

Whether this resolution changed anybody's mind is unclear, but opposition to the school appears to have died away; at least no serious attack against the school followed.

The populist charge that Central was a rich man's school is not borne out by the records, which indicate that among the children of the first class admitted, 32 percent of the parents were involved in business, 31 percent were laborers, and 10 percent were professionals, although how the administration defined these categories is unknown.¹⁰

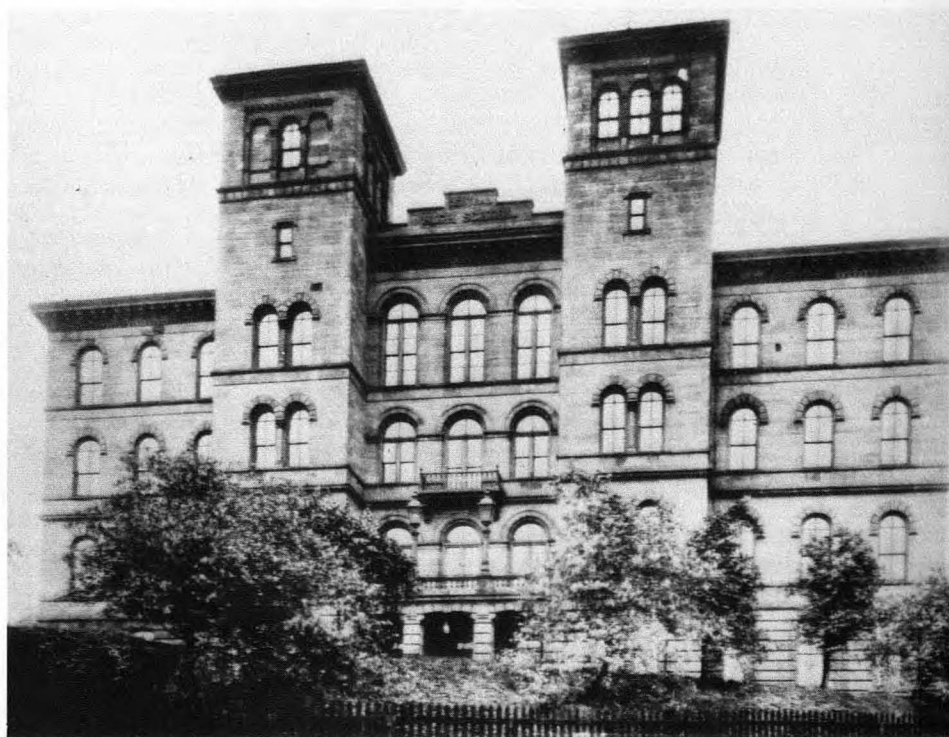
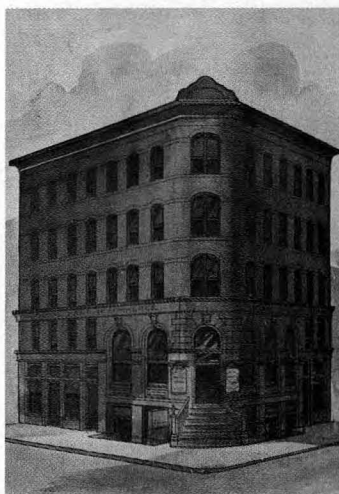
From 1861 to 1865, the Civil War seriously interfered with education and touched the lives of many students. By the end of the war, 254 men had graduated from Central High School; of that number, 81 served with the Union Army, seven were killed, 10 were wounded, two died of disease, and one was a prisoner of war. Central boasted that 25 percent of its graduates had served their country, and that this percentage could not be matched by any other school in the United States.¹¹

Despite slow growth and public opposition, Central's enrollment increased to approximately 170 and larger quarters became necessary. In 1868, the school moved to the Bank of Commerce Building at Wood Street and Sixth Avenue. The new facilities were markedly better, although not ideal. The building had five floors with long, steep stairs; it had light, airy rooms, steam heat, and a large chapel room. Improved conditions no doubt raised student morale, as perhaps is evidenced by their nicknaming of the school's custodian, Hughey Boice, as "The Professor of Dust and Ashes." Wood

Street, paved with wooden blocks, proved much quieter than the Smithfield Street location. A student at the school recorded that "after lunch our pastime was watching the boys from Rinehart's Tobacco Factory (adjoining us) playing baseball on Wood Street."¹²

The school stayed there only three years. Growth in enrollment from 169 to 370 made effective teaching almost impossible. Separate classes often had to meet in the same rooms, demonstrating that the school had outgrown its building. In the meantime, Principal Philotus Dean began an almost one-man

campaign for the construction of a new building.¹³ Under pressure from several citizens' groups, the Pittsburgh School Board purchased a tract of land on the corner of Fulton Street and Bedford Avenue in what is now known as the Hill District. When construction began on the new school, a gala cornerstone-laying ceremony marked



From 1868 to 1871, Central High was at Sixth Avenue and Wood Street, *top*. The school moved in 1872 to Bedford and Crawford streets, *above*.

the occasion and a newspaper called it “an epochal day in the history of education in Pittsburgh.”¹⁴

The gigantic celebration took place on September 29, 1869. Fully 10,000 students and friends of public education marched in a parade from Penn Avenue and Fifth Street to the new building site, just beyond the present-day site of the Civic Arena. The Iron City Brass Band, the Germania Turners Brass Band, the faculty of the school, and the members of the Board of Education all marched in the parade. Four thousand school children participated, and spectators thronged the streets. A beautifully decorated arch at



Novelist Willa Cather taught at Central 1901-02.

the entrance to the grounds led to platforms built for the speakers. When the parade reached its destination, police opened a path for the marchers, and then permitted the crowd to assemble on the hillside.¹⁵

A lengthy program of speeches and music preceded the ceremony in which a variety of objects, including Bibles, directories, lists of alumni, school codes, and

histories of the school were deposited under the cornerstone. Principal Dean gave a long oration; pupils sang “America” to the accompaniment of six Etsey organs played by the city’s music teachers.¹⁶ John Kerr, an alumnus of the school, delivered the final oration:

We are gathered here today to hear the first sound of the hammer upon the walls of a permanent structure for free academic education. This age is progressive; we must not stand where our fathers stood. We must not wait on the portals of the future with the rust-stained key of the past. The High School approaches that true ideal of public instruction, where the schools shall be free to all, good enough for all, and attended by the children of all.¹⁷

All the children wore large badges identifying their elementary schools; many carried huge banners and girls carried bouquets of flowers. It was a foot parade; no vehicle was permitted. One newspaper noted: “The whole affair was one of the grandest and most imposing spectacles ever witnessed in the city.”¹⁸ Central High School, built at a cost of \$200,000, must have seemed like a state-of-the-art facility when completed in 1872. Designed for 600 students, it

contained 14 classrooms, a large lecture room with raised seating, two apparatus rooms for chemistry and physics, a drawing room, a library, a 1,000-seat auditorium, a stage with proscenium and footlights, and the requisite restrooms and offices.¹⁹

The first principal in the new building, Benjamin Cutler Jillson, headed a faculty of 18 full- and part-time teachers. There were 436 pupils enrolled the first year. The typical school day began at 8:45 a.m. and ended at 2:15 p.m. — not much different than today’s schedules. There was a daily recess of 20 minutes. Two bells rang to signal a change of classes; the first bell signalled room changes for the girl students, and with the second bell, three minutes later, the boys moved to their new classes.

The man given the most credit for the creation of the new school, Philotus Dean, had tirelessly lobbied and planned for the school and even had bought the equipment for it. He developed typhoid fever during the summer of 1871, and after only a 10-day illness, died at age 49, never living to see the school’s opening. Dean was never properly memorialized for his sacrifices. Many years later, when Pittsburgh built its first great, modern high school, the school board chose to name it for a Captain Windham Harrington Schenley, a British citizen who lived in Pittsburgh for a brief period before 1863 and whose connection to education in Pittsburgh was tenuous at best.

Over the years, several prominent people served on the Central faculty. Willa Cather, clearly the most famous, was one of America’s major female novelists. She came to Pittsburgh from Nebraska in 1897 and spent four years working for the *Pittsburgh Leader*, a literary magazine owned by the Nevin family. At that time, Willa began to write, but found that her work on the magazine left her little time for writing. Thus she began her teaching career at Central in March, 1901, as a replacement for a Latin teacher, Belle Weidman, but after Burkey Patterson resigned in 1901, Cather became a full-time English teacher the following autumn.²⁰

Norman Foerster, one of her pupils and later a renowned teacher, editor, and critic, notes that this newer school, despite its pristine beginnings, eventually become marked by Pittsburgh’s distinctive turn-of-the-century signature:

The Central High School was a dismal grimy structure on a bluff looking down on the Union Station. The darkness in fog and smoke in fall and winter, the dirt of the squalid streets that led up to it, must have made Willa Cather feel that the great plains and the skies of Nebraska were very far away, as they were.²¹

Students remembered Cather as the only young teacher in a faculty of formal, grey-haired veterans. She inspired her students by what they called her “breezy, Western way with people,” and folklore has

it that she startled students on the first day of class by greeting them while seated on the top of her desk. She was considered an able English teacher and a strict disciplinarian. Cather eventually left Central for a new teaching position in the English Department at Allegheny High School at an annual salary of \$750. When she resigned from that position in 1906, she was earning \$1,300.²²

Another well-known faculty member at Central was Sara Soffel, also a graduate of the school. Later to become Judge Soffel, she was a good basketball player and coached the girls basketball team at Central. She used to boast that her 1911 team was the outstanding girls team in Western Pennsylvania.²³

Clearly life at Central was not all academics. Its budget for athletics in 1907 totaled \$2,500. Central also boasted a chorus of over 100 voices, an orchestra which played at many civic events, and a newspaper it claimed was one of the best in the country.

To gain admission to the school, students had to pass strict examinations in arithmetic, grammar, geography, U.S. history, orthography, and algebra to quadratics.²⁴ The school enforced academic standards by dismissing students regularly for "habitually neglecting their studies." Laws in those days did not require high school attendance, so permanent suspensions were not hard to enforce.²⁵

A disciplinary log from the high school provides insight into turn-of-the-century ethics. In 1901, the principal suspended a student from school for opening a note intended for his father. The log reports that he was suspended for two weeks, but was reinstated "at the intercession of the Mayor of the city." That same year, one student called the principal a liar. The principal replied, "I am no more a liar than you are," whereupon the student struck the principal a blow on the ear. The student was suspended for two weeks but was reinstated after one week.²⁶

Despite these incidents, teachers in the early twentieth century were highly esteemed, but like many of

their modern counterparts, they were poorly paid. Beginning teachers usually started at \$500 per year, with the top salary not much above \$1,000. Six-room houses at the time rented for \$55 and \$60 per month without heat, so clearly, teachers did not live very graciously.²⁷

In 1916, Central's life as a public secondary school ended. The faculty and student body moved to the recently completed Schenley High School. From 1916 to 1933, Central's building housed what was known as the "Short Course Business High School." Many Pittsburghers learned their secretarial and clerical skills there and fondly remembered their school days at "Old Central." After that program ended, the building was used during the Depression years as the local offices of the National Youth Administration and



Class of 1908

the Works Progress Administration.

Central High School was the first and oldest high school building in the city; Fifth Avenue High School was the next oldest, followed by South High School; only the latter is still in use as a school building.

In 1946, Central High, by then an old landmark known for its twin towers, was torn down. Much of its building material was hauled to Mt. Lebanon and

used there in the construction of that rapidly expanding suburb. In the 45 years of its existence as a high school, almost 5,000 young men and women were graduated into the professional, business, and social life of the city of Pittsburgh. That number includes over 1,500 teachers, most of whom taught for some time in the Pittsburgh public schools.²⁸

Long after the building had disappeared, alumni kept Central's spirit alive with annual class reunions. The class of 1912, for example, held regular reunions every five years up to 1957, when the reunion in the Carlton House on Grant Street included alumni from as far away as Hollywood, Montreal, Dallas, and San Diego.²⁹ It was the last recorded celebration for many of the students who punctuated Central's checkered history. ■

¹ W.D. McCoy, "Establishment and Development of Pittsburgh Central High School," *Educational Bulletin* (1959), a regular Pittsburgh educational publication.

² George T. Fleming, "The Old Central High School," *Gazette Times*, June 13, 1920. Fleming was a member of the last class to attend Central at its Smithfield Street location. He reminisced about the long walks that most students took to get home, but said that most welcomed them after six hours of study in sitting positions. He also described the transit vehicles, which were horse drawn and "slow to exasperation."

³ McCoy, *Educational Bulletin*. Rev. McKown, who, like most early male school teachers was a minister, stayed on the job for only one year. He was succeeded by Rev. David H.A. McClean, a 30-year-old mathematics professor from Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pa., who held the job for three years.

⁴ *Pittsburgh's Schools* 33 (Sept.-Dec. 1958), publication of the Board of Education.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ George T. Fleming, *Flem's Fancies, Volume 2: My High School Days* (Pittsburgh, 1904), 111ff.

⁷ Fleming, *Gazette Times*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ McCoy, *Educational Bulletin*.

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, Oct. 14, 1946. This charge of elitism probably reflected the success of its graduates. By the early 1900s, Central's alumni included 100 attorneys, 59 physicians, seven dentists, and 17 clergymen.

¹¹ McCoy, *Educational Bulletin*.

¹² Fleming, *Gazette Times*. He described the transfer of the high school to its new quarters on Wood Street as "a move from darkness into light; air and comfort made happier pupils and gave them a new thrill to their high school life."

¹³ *Pittsburgh Teachers Bulletin* (Nov. 1946), and *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, Oct. 14, 1946. The only effort to recognize Philotus Dean's contribution was the establishment of a Dean's Literary Society, which remained active for many years after his death.

¹⁴ "A Gala Day of a Half Century Ago," *Gazette Times*, Oct. 10, 1920.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "The People's College," newspaper clipping, Oct. 1, 1869, name of newspaper unknown, clipping file, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ G.M. Kelly, *Handbook of Greater Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1895).

²⁰ Leonora R. Elkus, ed., *Famous Men and Women of Pittsburgh*, (Pittsburgh, 1981).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* Willa Cather's students at Central praised her talents. They recalled her meticulous attention to detail, her forthright manner, her demands that they write every day for class — a perfectionist who often demanded too much from her students.

²³ *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, Oct. 14, 1946.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Board of Education Minute Books, 1855-1890, vol. A, Special Collections, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ McCoy, *Educational Bulletin*.

²⁸ "Old Central High Building in Process of Being Razed," *Pittsburgh Teachers Bulletin* (Nov. 1946).

²⁹ Class reunion programs for Central High School, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Archives, Pittsburgh.

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