

Baytown's Horace Mann Junior High: Metaphor for a Changing Community

One of Baytown's historic landmarks, Horace Mann Junior High School, has been marked for demolition after almost seventy years of service to the community. This graceful mission revival structure located at 610 Pruett in Baytown, Texas, an industrial community of some 60,000 situated at the western end of Galveston Bay, was originally built in 1922. It was to serve high school students from the communities of Pelly, Goose Creek, and Baytown. Horace Mann, formerly Goose Creek High, began as the pivotal

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cornerstone in an ambitious endeavor to establish a stable educational environment in an ever changing "boom town" society. Yet, even with such laudable intentions, Goose Creek High became a victim in a conflict over territory and shifting political alliances within the community. Ironically, Horace Mann faces an uncertain future because

of a similar struggle almost seventy years later. This school, in essence, has become a barometer for this divided community characterized by a constant need for progressive expansion in a continually shifting social and political climate.

The fundamental contention over Goose Creek/Horace Mann began with the formation of the Goose Creek School District and the union of three communities. The Goose Creek School District separated from the Cedar Bayou District and organized



Baytown's Horace Mann Junior School as it appears today. From the beginning, the school was surrounded by controversy.

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an independent school board on July 26, 1919 (G.C. Board Minutes 1). Members representing the Tri-Cities of Pelly, Goose Creek, and Baytown compromised.

The new Goose Creek school board, composed of representatives of

the cities of Pelly, Goose Creek and Baytown, proposed a progressive building program within a year after the district's creation. In 1920, the district approved a \$200,000 bond issue to finance five new schools to replace the temporary structures built during the confusion and rush of the early oil boom days of 1917 (School

Board Minutes 34-38). Even though the Tri-Cities, the term used by locals to refer to their three towns, were united by the common bonds of the oil

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industry and of their educational system, a political rivalry which existed between these three prosperous communities extended to the struggle for superiority within the school district (Hartman). Consequently, Goose Creek High School became the subject of a political tug-of-war which continued even after

the consolidation of the three communities in 1948 as the city of Baytown. The controversy surrounding Goose Creek High focused primarily

on its location in the town of Pelly, and despite the historical significance of this location, it could not

overcome the stigma of being on the wrong side of the railroad tracks separating the three communities—dividing the "old" from the "new."

The "old" in this instance refers to property purchased by the school district across the railroad tracks in Pelly, which many old-timers still describe as "Old Town." This

tract of land was part of an original Texas land grant to Harvey Whiting in May 1833 from the Mexican government (Map, City of Baytown), and Whiting had to sue the Republic of Texas in 1841 for legal possession of his property (Henson). In 1852, Dr. Ashbel Smith, a surgeon general in the Texas Army under Sam Houston from 1837-39, purchased 150 acres of the Whiting property for his "Headquarters" (Texas Abstract Map). Another historical figure, Mrs. Mary (Anson) Jones, widow of the last President of the Republic of Texas, acquired 460 acres on May 29, 1859 (including the Headquarters tract) from Ashbel Smith's brother Henry (Harris Co. Deed Records Vol. W: 760). After Anson Jones committed suicide in Galveston, Mrs. Jones gained distinction as the first President of the Daughters of the Republic ("Mrs. Jones" Galveston News). Mrs. Jones later sold half of her property to D. A. Wiggins in 1879, and Wiggins daughter inherited a portion of the property. Later, Miss Wiggins married an English gentleman named Fred T. Pelly (Harris Co. Deed Records 18:780). Eventually Pelly became the first mayor of the townsite, and the city assumed his name in 1920 ("Three Equals One").

In spite of its interesting heritage, however, this area had already acquired a dubious reputation by the time the school district acquired it in 1922. The Pelly townsite had originally been the oil field

boom town of Goose Creek, and most of the time this typical oil field town was "axle-deep in mud" (Hartman). According to local folklore, a few Goose Creek citizens moved away one night, taking the post office with them, and established another Goose Creek townsite on the prairie. Until 1919, Pelly was without a name and without a post office (Hartman). Actually, the post office was not "stolen" in the night; several businesses planned the move, establishing the "New Town" in a more desirable location (Henson 90). This progressive expansion marked the first in a series of aggressive moves that continued to characterize the tempestuous relationship between the Tri-Cities.

This struggle for territory carried over into school politics and first manifested itself in the rivalry between Baytown and Goose Creek citizens over the location of the high school in Pelly. On the south side of the railroad tracks, the Goose Creek School District purchased approximately eight acres of land in Pelly for the location of Goose Creek High and Anson Jones Ward schools. Originally, the proposed high school site was "New Town" (Goose Creek), but because of financial difficulties the school board reduced the number of proposed schools from five to three, and purchased property just across the tracks in Pelly where land values were considerably lower. The first

problem began with the building construction. Due to increasing incidents of sabotage to the building and harassment of the workmen, the school board was forced to hire peace officers for security (Board Minutes 1:117). Squatters on school property and unhappy citizens' objections to the location of the school created numerous disruptions. Consequently, when the students carried their chairs down Jones St. and across the railroad tracks to the new school in 1923, the building was still under construction.

Furthermore, the conflict did not end with the opening of the school as the three towns continued to war, and each town attempted to control the school board. According to Ethan Bruce, a principal in 1926, "the interests of the children is [sic] the pawn" in a "damnable chess game" (25). Political sparring was often carried out in less than subtle articles addressed "To the Public" in the local newspaper (*Semi-Weekly Tribune*). Moreover, each town felt justified in its efforts to control the district. Goose Creek boasted the largest population, the largest bank of the territory, and the best water system. Pelly was larger geographically, but land values were much lower than in the more compact Goose Creek community (Hartman). Pelly and Goose Creek both had separate city governments while Baytown was not incorporated at all. Baytown, however, was the money center,

housing the giant Humble Oil Company Refinery which employed citizens from all three cities (Bruce 247). These factors all contributed to the jealousy and subsequent rivalry that ended in the relocation of Goose Creek High School.

Another factor which contributed to the school's relocation was a boycott staged by Baytown parents. The citizens of Baytown repeatedly refused to allow their children to attend the high school in Pelly even though it was a very modern facility with thirteen classrooms and five instructors. Before they would send their children to a "tacky old place like Pelly, they would rather run a private school" (Virgie King). The residents of Baytown, mainly immigrants from New Jersey and Pennsylvania, considered themselves socially superior to the citizens of Goose Creek and Pelly. Superintendent of Humble Oil, R.E. Powell, also from Pennsylvania, led a proposal to divide the district and create a high school for Baytown (Powell). Baytown Elementary, originally a school of only five grades, was being increased by one grade each year as the students were promoted to the next grade to keep them from going to Pelly. In 1926, Baytown Elementary ran eighth grade classes for only one student even though bus service was provided to the high school in Pelly (Bruce 291).

Although the high school issue did not ultimately di-



The main entrance to Horace Mann reflects the mission revival architectural style popular in the 1920s.

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Dorothy Zierek, Offie Connelly, and LaPearl Bradly were photographed at Horace Mann in 1925, shortly after the school opened. The surprised student to the left is Willie (Wilma?) Mae Westbrook.

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vide the district, a bond issue of \$450,000 was voted by the "progressive citizens" to include a new high school halfway between Baytown, Goose Creek, and Pelly ("Board of Education" 1928). Ironically, the location for the Robert E. Lee High School was still situated within Pelly city limits. Goose Creek tried to annex the high school campus be-

fore a district court injunction halted the effort. Paradoxically the underdog, Pelly, was able to annex the "continuous and unincorporated" section of Baytown in 1945 thus enabling Pelly (with the added Baytown population) to take over Goose Creek in the Consolidation merger of 1947. In 1948, the consolidated Tri-Cities adopted the name Baytown

("Ballots", Baytown Sun). Before this triumph, however, the citizens of Baytown won a victory over Pelly in 1927 when they relocated the high school campus closer to Baytown.

With the opening of Robert E. Lee in 1928, the old Goose Creek High School became one of two junior high schools in the district. On January 9, 1930, Goose Creek Junior was renamed Horace Mann. It is doubtful that the great educator Horace Mann would have been pleased with the Goose Creek High School controversy since he once said, "Select schools for select children should be discarded" (Tharp 178). Instead, Goose Creek was "discarded" for the addition of a "select school" in Baytown.

After only a five-year career as a high school Horace Mann was presented with a new Mission Revival facade, suggesting that the controversy would fade into obscurity by covering up the old building. Perhaps the old conflicts did fade for a while as the growth of Horace Mann paced the ever increasing growth of the school district. Mr. Bruce recalls "watching the addition to the Goose Creek-Pelly Junior High school go forward with mingled mirth and regret. The foundation of the addition, like the river, went on forever, almost" [sic] (406). "Forever" in this instance lasted almost seventy years before another controversy surfaced over the same issue—the relocation of

Horace Mann.

In 1991, the G.C.C.I.S.D school board unanimously approved a proposal to relocate Horace Mann to a new 33 acre site extending from Highway 146 south to Tri-City Beach Road at a cost of \$375,000 for the property; another \$38.5 million has been allotted for constructing two

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schools. Reasons cited by the school board include concerns voiced by community parents and Horace Mann teachers which focus on the undesirability of the present location due to vandalism, student safety, and the deterioration of the building. Although these are legitimate complaints, they are not unique to Horace Mann. These concerns could be remedied with much less investment than relocating the school, but the unspoken issues perhaps cannot be remedied with only money. Dr. Harry Griffith, the present school superintendent, related

in a recent article, "I can't recommend staying if we have to put bars up in the school" (Feibleman).

After almost seventy years, the major underlying issue still concerns the building's location. For a time, Horace Mann expanded with Baytown, and as the population increased, Goose Creek district made numerous improvements and additions to accommodate growing student enrollment. Unfortunately as Baytown growth shifted away from Texas Avenue and up Garth Road, and the once thriving central business district began to decay, the interest in revitalizing "old" Baytown's deteriorating neighborhood (including Horace Mann) decreased.

Another factor related to the neighborhood revolves around ethnic distribution. As Baytown gravitated toward new areas, the white population moved into new subdivisions and abandoned "old" Baytown to minorities. Prior to the school district's desegregation in the late 1960s, Goose Creek boasted one Mexican and one black school, each located on the fringe of Tri-City communities ("Board of Education" 1927). Since integration, the ethnic distribution of Horace Mann had climbed steadily in favor of minorities for the past twenty years. The school district "gerymandered" the school zones in 1985 to achieve racial balance at Horace Mann. As former superintendent Dr. Johnny Clark noted, "We tried

to make sure Horace Mann was not a ghetto or minority school" ("Junior High Zones Changed"). Three predominately white areas were reassigned to Horace Mann in an attempt at reverse integration, but even still white students remained in the minority. In 1987, less than half the student population of 816 students was white, and by 1991 white students were in the minority comprising less than one-third of the student body ("Ethnic Breakdown").

Finally, the school itself is deteriorating, and roughly 100,000 sq. ft. of Horace Mann needs to be renovated. Instead of rejuvenating this historic building, however, the district feels its needs would be better served by a new building rather than in maintaining the old. Renovation could be accomplished at a fraction of the cost of total new construction; security fencing could be installed, and new buildings and parking could be expanded to the adjacent school property. Regrettably the bottom line remains; the location is still undesirable (Feibleman). In the final analysis, the major issue is the school's location. Goose Creek High started its career on the wrong side of the tracks and is currently earmarked for destruction because it is still on the wrong side of the tracks.

Instead of just removing the old town post office this time, however, the proposed demolition of Horace Mann will remove not only the last community anchor in an already

failing area of Baytown, but will remove a vital part of its heritage as well. The Texas State Department of Education Course of Study of 1925 cites, "the fundamental aim of history teaching is to give the student an understanding of the past and to show that this past bears in a vital way upon the present, in this understanding the student should see the orderly change and development of civilization . . ." (40). What does this "understanding show" about the progress and "development of civilization" when it is in the best interest of the community to take the schools out of the neighborhoods and relocate them on the highway?

The controversy surrounding the location of Goose Creek High and the growth of Horace Mann Junior High and its potential demolition, in microcosm, is a portrait of the growth of Baytown itself. Baytown's restless expansionism and "boomtown" mentality has been passed from generation to generation until much of its heritage has been misplaced in this evolution. In the case of Horace Mann, the school never fully overcame the stigma of being built in "nasty old Pelly." Even though a cornerstone in a progressive educational system, it became a pawn in a political contest as the Tri-Cities struggled for dominance and territory. Consequently, Horace Mann remains a pawn in an ongoing struggle to abandon the old and establish the new. As Mr. Bruce said of

Baytown 65 years ago, "The thing is in the process of building; just what it will be after it is made, I cannot tell" (246).

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