

“Where’d you go to high school?” Analyzing of a century of the IPS caste system

Making a Mass Institution: Indianapolis and the American High School, Dr. Kyle Steele

Making a Mass Institution describes how Indianapolis, Indiana created a divided and unjust system of high schools over the course of the twentieth century, one that effectively sorted students geographically, economically, and racially. Like most U.S. cities, Indianapolis began its secondary system with a singular, decidedly academic high school, but ended the 1960s with multiple high schools with numerous paths to graduation. Some of the schools were academic, others vocational, and others still for what was eventually called "life adjustment." This system mirrored the multiple forces of mass society that surrounded it, as it became more bureaucratic, more focused on identifying and organizing students based on perceived abilities, and more anxious about teaching conformity to middle-class values.

The actions of the 1922 Indianapolis power structure to create a segregated and hierarchical public school system is described here by Mr. Henry J. Richardson Jr., long-time Indianapolis legislator, lawyer, and civil rights activist. Comments taken from 1979 oral history interview on the history of IPS.

Mr. Richardson Jr.: Let me start with myself. I finished Shortridge High School in 1921 when Shortridge was at the northeast corner of Pennsylvania and Michigan. There was integration--there was no segregation of schools. Manual was on the south side and Tech on the eastside and Broad Ripple had a little school up north. So what happened was in 1922 the public school board had a meeting with the purpose of setting up segregated schools under the permissive act of the 1867.

Are you Jewish?

John Loflin: No, I'm not.

Mr. Richardson Jr.: Well, I might as well tell you this. The prejudice here as a matter of basic social differential of races was more acute as far as the Catholics and the Jews as it was anything else.

John Loflin: Even color?

Mr. Richardson Jr.: Oh yes. And none of the Jews of any note lived north of Washington Street. They all lived on the south side--south Meridian Street and all that area in there was Jewish and of course the Jews went to Manual High School. Some of the Jews went to Shortridge. I used to sit with one of the Josephs and so forth.

(Mr. Richardson Jr. speaks emphatically) Well the acuteness as a manner of prejudice against the Jews and Catholics at that time was outstanding! So when the school board passed a resolution to form a special committee in 1922 to see about redistricting your high schools so that they would be able to get the Jews and the poor white people out of Shortridge and get the Negroes out. So they passed a resolution and they toyed with it, manipulated and maneuvered and they made an overall deal: that if we are going to build a new Shortridge we might as well do a good job while we're at it: get the poor white people from the south side and the Jews out of Shortridge, create Washington High School, move Shortridge High School, and build Attucks High School. That was all one deal. Manual High School would take care of the Jews and the poor white folks from Kingan's Hill [neighborhood] in West Indianapolis.

(Mr. Richardson Jr. speaks emphatically) Now you listen to me! So the deal was made to put Manual up for the Jews and poor white people from the south side, to take them out of Shortridge.

From p. 3 of the 1979 play, *Mr. Richardson, Jr.* by johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com director of the Charles E. & Virginia P. Loflin Center on the History of the Indianapolis Public Schools